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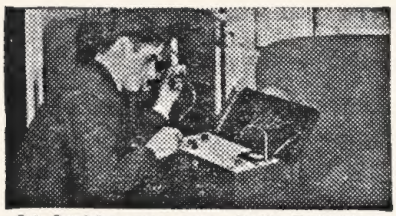

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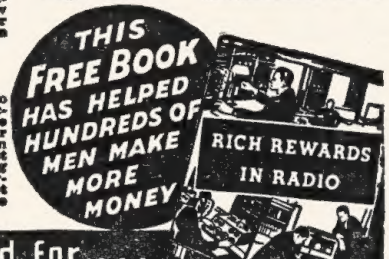

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SIX SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

JUNE ISSUE

PUBLISHED MAY 2nd!

STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 144-PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME TWENTY-THREE MAY, 1941 NUMBER FOUR

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Six Complete Short Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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★ Star Western Feature ★

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When blood, iron and buckskin built—and kept—the longhorn herds.

ALL STORIES NEW NO REPRINTS!

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 5, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1941, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. U. S. A. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.80. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York City. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

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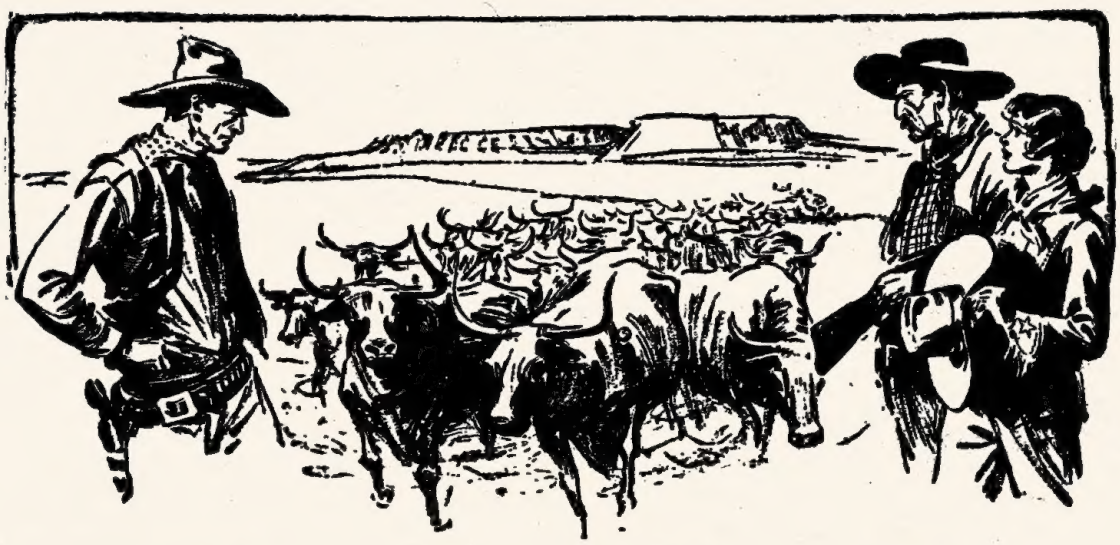


Up the Trail

THE OLD-TIMER crossed his knife and fork on his plate, and peered from under his gray eyebrows at the steak left on the platter. "Yeah," he said. "I'll take some more!"

His daughter heaped his plate again. "I'll certainly take this up with the butcher," she said. "This is the second time this year he's given me tough steak."

The Old-Timer snorted, not too gently. "Trouble with you young folks is that you're teeth are soft," he said. "This, likely, is Wyoming stuff, shipped to Iowa for feedin'. It's too tender, if anything.

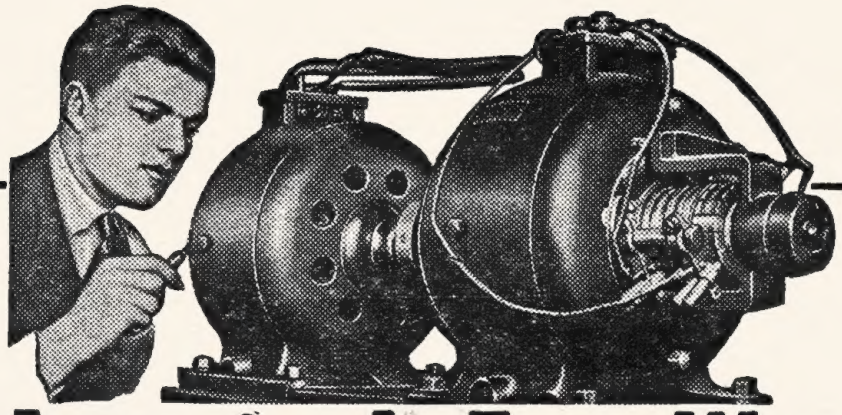
He jerked his chair around, and jabbed a boney forefinger at our chest. "Here you are a plumb greenhorn, spent a couple of months mebbe on a dude ranch, an' figger you know about beef!" (We hadn't said a word, but we knew it wouldn't do any good to remind him of that fact.) "About the nearest you ever get to the cattle business is when you call up the butcher an' order two pounds of porterhouse—over the phone, at that! Well, mister, next time you stick your fork into a piece of meat, just stop and think back a little. Mebbe it'll make you enjoy it more. . . ."

You know (the Old-Timer went on) how many men were killed, first to last, so that today you can call up the butcher and order beefsteak? Likely nobody does know, but I'll bet it ran well into the thousands. Think of the men—better, tougher men than you'll find nowadays—who drowned, swimmin' trail herds across the Red an' the Cimarron. Think of the fellers who roused up, groggy an' bone-weary, to try to mill a boogered, stampedin' herd. Some of 'em went down under poundin' hoofs, an' next day they were shoveled into a shallow grave by their saddle-pards. But that never stopped the drive.

Think of the ranchers who fought, bled and died in order to hold onto what few beeves they had, durin' some of the range feuds back in the old days. If the folks that eat the beef today could absorb even half the manhood that it took to build the cattle business, they might amount to somethin'!

Look: Nowadays, a feller steals your car. You run to the police, to the insurance company. Maybe you get it back; maybe not. But in the cattle business, you had to be your own policeman, an' your own insurance company. Nobody was there to listen to any sob-story. Besides, you'd be too busy, workin' and fightin' to feel sorry for yourself. . . .

Ever hear of the war between the Texas Panhandle and New Mexico? It had its start a long time back, before any white men had settled in the Panhandle, when the Comanches were runnin' wild. Mexi-



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cans from Santa Fe, Taos and other places in what's now New Mexico used the Panhandle for buffalo huntin', and—like the Indians—they used lances instead of rifles. But with the coming of white settlers, the Indians started their raids, and the Mexicans, smelling out a good thing, gave up hunting. They'd really struck it rich, they believed, for the Indians had no means of putting any value on the live-stock they'd stolen from the ranchers.

The Comancheros—the Mexes who traded with the Comanche raiders, swapping Injun whiskey, coffee and trinkets for the horses and cattle stolen from white settlers—became, in that way, what might be called "fences". And the Comanches, now having a ready market for everything they could grab, increased their raids.

Even Charley Goodnight couldn't make progress against them when, in 1867, on a trip to New Mexico, he came across six hundred head of his stolen cattle in the tender care of Mexicans. He went to the local court and sued to repossess his stock, but the court decided against him—and stuck him for the costs as well.

But in 1872, things took a different turn. Goodnight and others had continued to lose stock which were stolen by the Comanches and bought later by the Comancheros in New Mexico. John Hittson and H. M. Childress were a couple of ranchers who decided the time had come to do something about this. First, they called on their neighbors in the Panhandle and got their powers of attorney. Then, with some sixty stiff-necked cowmen, they crossed into New Mexico and headed for the Spanish settlements.

On the way, they saw a big herd of longhorns, and it didn't take them long to find most of the stock had once belonged to the very men who were on that expedition. They had no trouble in collecting those—without taking time to go to court about it. But word of their passage had already swept on before them. A few days farther on, they saw another herd, and were engaged in cutting out the stolen stock, when a large bunch of riders swooped down on them, the sun glinting on filled bandilleros and rifle-barrels.

Hittson and Childress rode up to meet the leaders. "We're doin' a mite of cuttin'," drawled one of theTexans, "unless you can show bonafide bills of sale for this herd."

A burly Mexican rode out; a star glittering on his open vest, an ivory-handled sixgun handy. There was an anticipatory stir among his men as their hands inched closer to their own weapons.

"This, señores," said the Mexican, "is a country that upholds the law. What right have you to come in and cut our herds?"

Childress showed him one of the powers of attorney from the Panhandle ranchers.

The Mexican smiled. "But, this is New Mexico and these are only good in Texas." He took the document, and slowly tore it into bits, scattering the fragments to the wind.

No one actually saw Childress' six-shooter come out of its holster and jam into the paunch of the Mexican. "Here's one power of attorney that's good in any territory in the cattle-country," he said softly. "We're still cuttin' this herd. Get busy, boys!"

The boys did. . . . And when the intrepid cowmen rode back to Texas, they drove before them a herd of eleven thousand head, which had been regained by a six-shooter writ of replevin. . . .

"Those Texas cowmen shore took that commandment that starts 'Thou shalt not covet' mighty serious," finished the Old-Timer. And that's just one of the many times when men were willing to pay with their own blood for the cattle that were theirs. Think of that next time you eat a piece of steak—it's better than any sauce you can buy to improve the flavor!"

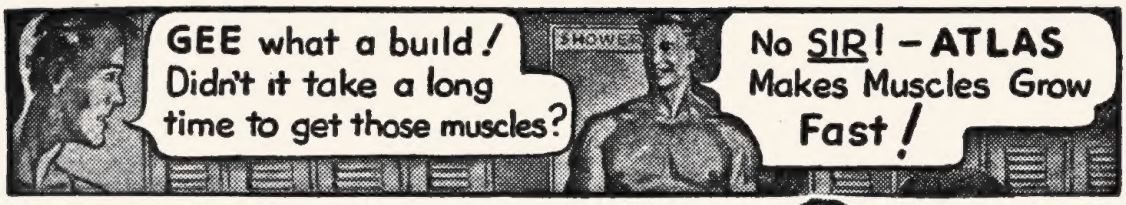
We told him then about a new story by Walt Coburn which is coming up in the next issue of this magazine. There, also, we said, he'd meet another cowman who was willing to fight and die to claim a ranch which was his, but one he scarcely even remembered! He would, we told him, sympathize with young Johnny Rance when Johnny rode back to Montana, to make his lone-hand play for the Lightin'-Struck R which, many years ago, had been taken from his dad in a bare-faced, ruthless steal.

We might have waxed a little too enthusiastic about the story of Johnny Rance in this novel, "Bullet-Heir to Cottonwood Valley," for the Old-Timer gave us a frosty look.

"Hah!" he snorted. "Why should I read such stories in your magazine? Why son, I actually *lived* stories like that!"

But because we think it might remind him of the old days, we're sending him a copy of this June issue on the day it's published—May 2nd!

—THE EDITORS.



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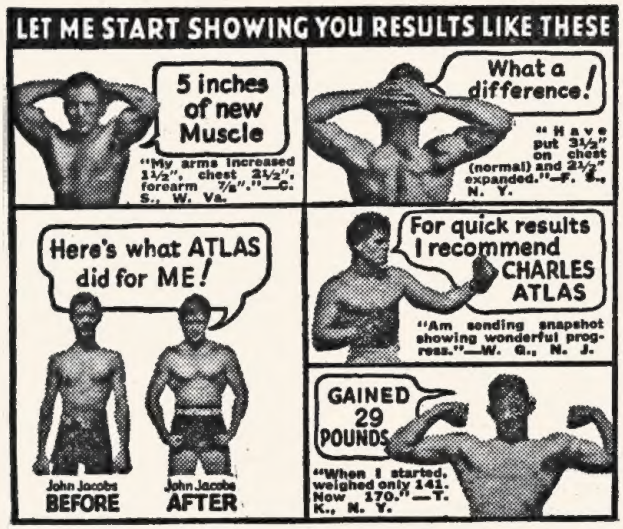
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By Tom Roan

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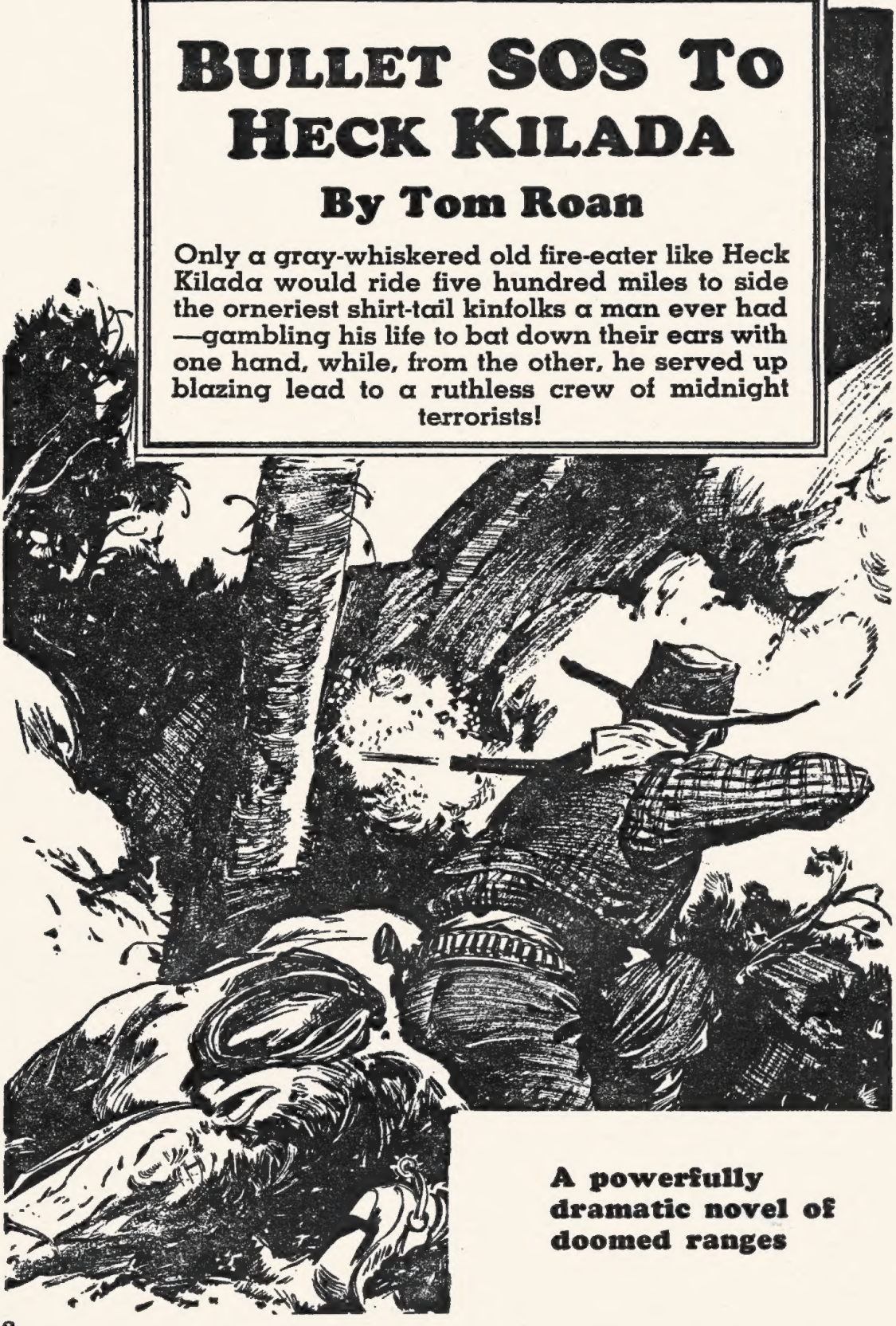

A powerfully dramatic novel of doomed ranges

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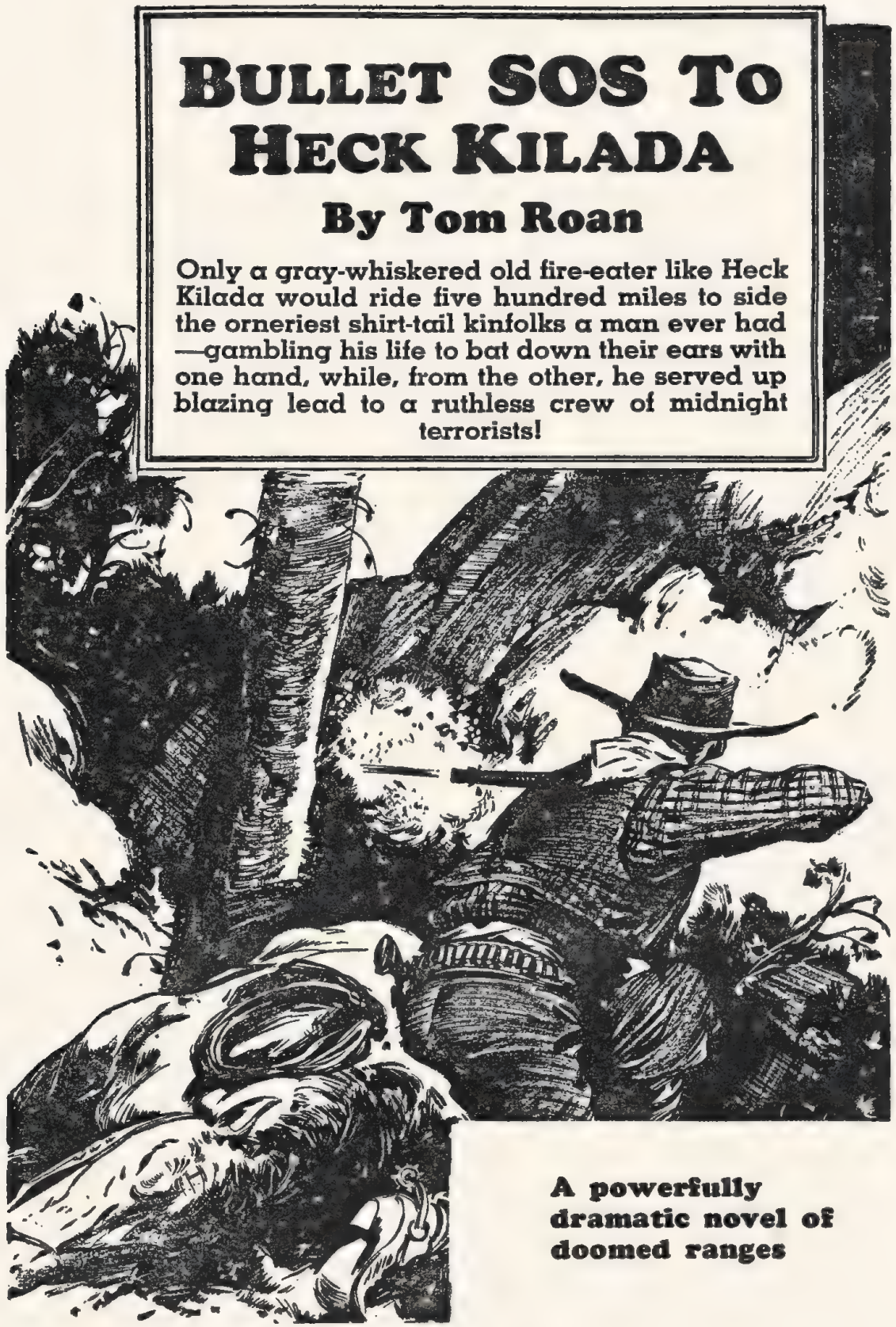

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CHAPTER ONE

Satan's Two-Legged Cyclone

HAMMERING and battering, knocking down and dragging out, the Saturday night birthday party for the first set of triplets born in Walking Horse had gone completely out of bounds in the Texas Trail Saloon.

An uncomplimentary stranger — a short, bottle-bellied man with a stubble of gray-reddish beard—had started the fuss by bombastically inquiring what manner of breed were the litter of pups, and

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whether the mother was pedigree or cur. A hook-nosed cowboy from Wagon Train Canyon had promptly broken a full-quart bottle of whiskey over his bald head, splattering him into a heap on the floor, only to have him come unwinding up like a gila monster with a cuspidor in his hand that dropped the cowpuncher cold between the footrail and the bar.

From a quiet carousal punctuated by only a few shots here and there, the high entertainment in the Texas Trail had been turned into a free-for-all. Table legs and smashing chairs seemed the order of the night, with the fire-shovel and poker from the upset stove in the corner taking their own part in the melee.

No one had yet noticed that the stranger had slipped out the back door and was quietly changing his saddle from a broken-down flea-bitten gray to the best horse behind the saloon.

Opportunity had smiled at Old Heck Kilada. Arriving in town shortly after darkness with a worn-out horse under him and a posse crowding behind him, he had found it necessary for a change of mounts. There were also two quarts of Yellowstone Jack in his bosom, snatched from the bar as he made his retreat. If the fight lasted just a little while longer, he would be miles away before anybody remembered the little fact that he had not paid for a single drink he had taken.

He did reach the head of the town just as a mob of thirty horsemen stormed into the foot of it. That mob came like devils ringing their anvils, and they were heading at once for the scene of all the noise. He saw a dozen men leave their horses like jumping jacks. He saw three men go bolting through the swinging red doors, and immediately they were coming sprawling back out with one of the gentlemen looking like a two-legged elk, because a smashed chair clamped over his head in place of antlers.

People entering the Texas Trail Saloon with such hilarity going on needed a little more tact! Kilada threw a kiss at the noise, grinned and turned the horse he had stolen straight for the higher hills. Maybe there a man might be able to catch a nap before morning in some quietly sheltered spot.

* * *

IT WAS a bit ironical that Old Joe Henning, the sheriff from Junction City, would have to come up over forty miles of the worst trail in Montana to help stop a fight in the ever-boastful, hard-as-nails. Sheriff Butch Bardlee's town. Backed by his posse of honest and thoroughly sober Junction City citizens, the older lawman had known exactly where to take hold, after getting the chair pulled off his head. In twenty minutes a few more faces had been broken, and a number had been whanged into unconsciousness, but law and order was restored. The crowds looked at each other wonderingly, still trying to figure it out what the fight was about, just who started it. And why.

"I never saw nothin' get up quicker," explained Jeff Carter, the saloon man, surveying the damage yet plucking up courage enough to start setting out the bottles again. "Drink one on the house. We can't forget Bill Marlin's litter of triplets. An' who was the stranger, do I hear somebody ask? I dunno. Mean lookin', old gray hat jammed on the back of his head, red boots run over at the heels, an' one of them perpetual motion grins on his face. He was waggin' a pair of big .45's.

"Sez he to me, lookin' me square in the eye—an' I could almost smell the pizen beginnin' to drool—'Yore whiskey's strong enough to pin a man's ears back, an' three snorts of it make me feel like yuh look. By any chance, Dead-An'-Don't-Know-it,' he further growls, 'was

yore ma scared by a giraffe just before yuh was born?' "

"We think we know who he is!" Henning, the Junction City sheriff, banged the bar with his fist. "We piled 'im in jail in Junction City last night as a hold-up suspect from the gang who robbed the Westbound Limited in Cradle Canyon five afternoons ago. He cracked Ed Winrow, my chief deputy, on the jaw this afternoon at three o'clock. In the fight that followed they upset the stove in the jail kitchen, an' the whole jailhouse was goin' up in smoke before a cat could lick his whiskers. That bird's a chuck-full of trigger-troubles, an' nothin' but. He made ever'body hunt a hole, an' he kept 'em in it until he got his mare out of the stables an' burned the wind!"

"No wonder he was tough!" exclaimed a tall, gray-haired cattleman from Thunder Pass. "I tried to stop the varmint when I saw 'im comin' my way like a chargin' bull. He broke my nose an' busted the upper plate of my new store-bought teeth wide-open!"

"But—but," bubbled a half-drunken cowboy, "just who is this duck, anyway? What's his name, sheriff?"

"Name!" Henning's eyes widened as he pawed a bottle to him. "He didn't leave no callin' cards scattered about after he'd torn up my jail an' set ever'thing afire."

"His callin' card's out back!" exclaimed another big cowboy. "Yuh oughta just see the shameful thing he done! He left a one-eared gray bronc mare, not worth more'n a dollar an' a half, out there an' he took Sheriff Butch Bradlee's fine racin' hoss. Butch is out there so mad he could gnaw the whiskers off a wildcat!"

"Hit saddles!" wailed a voice from behind the saloon. "Grab guns an' hit saddles, I tell you! We're pulling that devil's sign down before morning or I'm not the sheriff of Walking Horse! And—and I think I know the very place he's heading for!"

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Work for the Law

THE fugitive changed his mind when he halted on a distant hill and saw them boiling out of town behind him. A man had to play them out a little. Only a fool would drag them at his heels right where he wanted to go.

He was a man who knew how to play a posse out. That meant that the best thing to do was to lead them on for a spell and keep them in a body so that they would not be scattering out all over creation. In that manner a man could never tell where they were going to pop up.

Three long, harmless shots from his old Winchester pointed himself out to them from a timberless ridge flooded with moonlight. A few shots answered him, the bullets falling far short of their mark, and then he was heading westward along the bare back of the ridge, the noise behind him was like that of a pack of hounds with the prey in sight.

It had been years since he had ridden these parts, but he never forgot a country, not even when being pushed through it at night ahead of a posse. In this direction, only about four miles away, was the mouth of a deep canyon, and if he could head the posse into it he would be rid of them for the rest of the night, then he could swing back peacefully about his business.

A glance back here and there told him that the possemen were well aware of that canyon ahead. He saw men stringing out as he plunged down the ridge to strike a narrow little valley. They were dead-certain now that they were pushing him straight into the jaws of a trap. He grinned, and kept traveling.

There was just one place where he could give them the slip after he struck a pine thicket in the mouth of the canyon. Swinging abruptly to the right, he turned

up through a narrow break. When he reached the top he could hear the hoofs racing below.

That was good—just as he wanted it to be! That gang could ride for hours down there, each man knowing that he could not switch back without being seen. He started bending his course away from the canyon rim to head northward, when a wild volley of shots turned him back.

The posse had plunged head-on into trouble of a wholly unexpected source. Heck Kilada saw that when he left his "borrowed" horse in the shelter of a little cluster of pine and crept afoot to the rim to look down.

He scratched his head, scowling. "Looks like two fightin' gangs run afoul of each other an' tryin' their best to kill ever'body on each side!"

The posse had swung out. Men had left their horses and had sought cover behind anything at hand. Rifle muzzles were pouring a hot fire up the canyon toward a dark spot in the south wall, and out of that dark spot a heavy return fire was raging.

Kilada did not see the drove of horses for a few moments. There were thirty-five or forty of them on up the canyon in another dark pocket, with four riders trying to hold them while the rest of their gang kept up the hot fight with the possemen. It was puzzling, but not for long.

"Rustlers, as shore as shootin'!" Kilada grinned again. "An' me leadin' the law right in on 'em! Well, boys, it's yore funeral now. Jawn Harper said this whole country had become a rustler roost when he sent for me."

The battle down there was soon going against the rustlers. Kilada saw the horse herd make a wild break when a stray bullet landed among them and a big claybank started lunging and bawling. The sudden rush of frightened brutes swept the four men trying to hold them out in the open. One of the men yelled, threw up his hands, and rolled backward out of his own lunging horse's saddle.

Suddenly the others were breaking, falling back, and another man going down as he raced for his horse. A volley of yells lifted from the possemen. Now they were snatching for their horses, and in a matter of just a few seconds more it was a riot down there with the possemen giving chase and the rustlers fleeing for their lives.

"An' there's only one place where they can leave the canyon!" Kilada was laughing as he rushed back to his horse. "That's a notch on the north rim. If they're stopped there, then they'll have to keep goin' until they're in a box an' no way out. Come along, hoss! Looks like we're j'inin' up with the posse for a spell."

Only a race horse could have beaten the rustlers to the notch in the canyon wall. Tilted forward over his saddle horn, spurs gouging, stirrups whipping the brush, Kilada was like a flying shadow for the next few minutes. Memory was serving him well here. He was looking for a cone-shaped pinnacle of rock ahead.

"There she is!" he cried at last. "Hoss, yuh shorely get over the ground like nobody's business."

He was just in time. There was already a sound of hoofs on the shale-covered slope below as he flung out of his saddle, tied the horse to a low limb, and leaped forward. This was sixgun work, and he started in at once, old .45's throwing lead terror into the rustlers below.

"It's a trick!" somebody bawled that. "They let us in through the notch with the horses, an' now they've closed the jug on us! Scatter back, boys!"

"Kill 'em, boys!" roared Kilada. "Give 'em no quarter unless they head up the canyon an' surrender!"

He was making enough noise for a dozen men. In panic, the rustlers turned back, only to be met by the storming possemen below. In just a moment more it

was again a race. The possemen swept on past the notch, the rustlers falling back, their yells and the sounds of the shots filling the night.

Kilada reloaded his old six-shooters, took a chew of tobacco, and stood there watching the race. "It's just too bad on the hoss rustlers . . . .

He turned back to the borrowed horse, "I reckon the rest is a peaceful an' gentle night for us. The law never will be able to say I didn't he'p 'em out in a pinch! Let's get goin'."

* * *

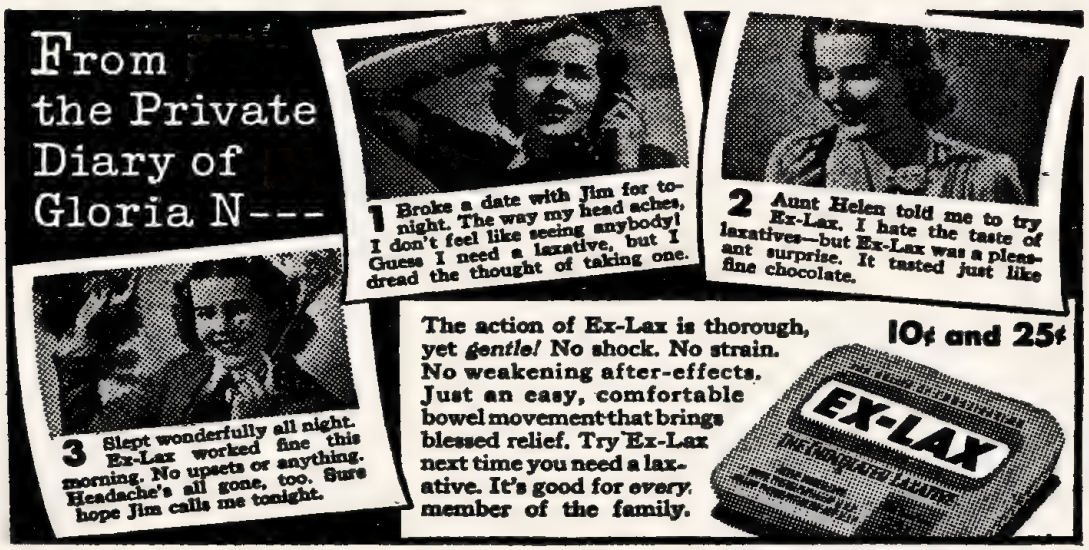
NOT until he was far up the canyon rim, did he stretch out like an old fox on a bed of pine needles while listening to the sounds of the fierce fight in the head of the canyon. It had gone hard on the rustlers. Hemmed in by smooth walls of rock all around and sorely outnumbered, they had gone by the board, some electing to die fighting it out, others throwing down their guns and surrendering. When the posse came back down the canyon there were dead and wounded men sprawled across horses and prisoners tied in their saddles, justice-bound.

But it had not been the end of the posse entirely. Others had been left behind to look for him. Twice during his sleep Kilada was aroused by the distant hoofs whipping through the night. They were hunting him, trying to run him down to bed-rock this time, but it did not bother him a great deal. He had been hunted in the past—and run out of heap better country! Besides, if those monkeys hunting him had better horses than the one he had borrowed, then he would just have to halt and make a fight of it.

Along with that, he had not come to this part of the country to be run out ot it! There was a typical Old Heck Kilada job for him to do. If he had to duck about through the hills for weeks, he would do it before he left, or die in the attempt. And maybe—after all—folks would not be so all-fired set on running him out, once he had done his job for them.

"An' as far as that train hold-up," he told himself drowsily, "that was out at the start. Any fool who knows me would know I ain't the kind to run in a pack. If I'd robbed a train, I'd have robbed it by mys'ef!"

Wolfing down a chunk of raw bacon and an onion as large as his fist, and settling meat and vegetables with a couple of healthy slugs from his remaining quart


From the Private Diary of Gloria N---
1 Broke a date with Jim for tonight. The way my head aches, I don't feel like seeing anybody! I don't feel like seeing anybody! Guess I need a laxative, but I dread the thought of taking one.
2 Aunt Helen told me to try Ex-Lax. I hate the taste of laxatives—but Ex-Lax was a pleasant surprise. It tasted just like fine chocolate.
3 Slept wonderfully all night. Ex-Lax worked fine this morning. No upsets or anything. Headache's all gone, too. Sure hope Jim calls me tonight.
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of Yellowstone Jack, he was again ready for travel when daylight was at hand. A closer look at the horse told him that he would soon have to part company with him.

The horse was tall and black, with legs that somehow reminded a man a shade too much of pipestems. Racing stuff, and not worth a toot a corralful when it came to hard work over a rough trail some black night. So dad-burned fine for racing stuff, however, he didn't even have a brand on him. People would know that horse without a brand, and the whole country would be looking for him.

"So me an' yuh, boss," he growled, "must come to the partin' of the ways. I was hung once for a hoss thief, an' it wasn't ary bit funny even if the rope was just a mite too rotten to hold. I'll set yuh free to run where yuh will."

His chance was at hand after he had gone three miles. Swinging down out of the jackpined hills where he had slept, he came upon a small band of range horses in the head of a coulee. Riding slowly among them with his rope ready he studied their brands and nodded.

"J. H., yeah," he nodded. "That stands for Jawn Harper. Little bay hoss with the purty white feet, I reckon I'll take yuh unto my bosom."

His rope, hidden down beside his leg until this moment to keep from exciting the band, now shot forward with the certainty of a striking snake. Its loop closed around the suddenly startled horse's neck, and a few moments later he was on the ground and humming an old Bible hymn as he was changing the saddle from the racer to the bay.

The bay looked all right and seemed gentle enough as he tightened the cinch. But trouble looked him in the eye when he sent the racer trotting away with a slap of his hat, and then turned back to swing into the saddle. The bay seemed to only stagger out, bracing his feet and humping his back as if to keep from falling.

"What now?" scowled Kilada. "Maybe yo're a wagon hoss an' ain't never been under saddle. We're headin' for Jawn's—Whoa, fool! *Whoa!*"

* * *

THE lightning had suddenly let loose. With a snort the horse was in the air, a heaving, corkscrewing hellion of straining and snapping muscles bent on mopping up the earth with that two-legged thing clamped into the saddle like a overgrown monk.

Almost unseated by the unexpected, quick-as-a-flying-bat jump, Kilada found himself clawing leather for the first time in more than twenty years. He righted himself with the horse's second wild jump, then released the saddle horn.

For the next few minutes it was one of the wildest, bronc-fighting rides any cowboy could have taken. The horse was a natural pitcher, a brute that seemed to know all the tricks, and confined all his bucking in a forty-foot circle. It was fence-row, sun-fish, back-fire and spin, and the threat of a hoolahan every three seconds.

The horse did not bawl a single time. That in itself was bad. As a general rule horses quick to bawl were quick to stop pitching. This brute was a fighter, asking for no quarter and going to carry through to the end.

"If yuh break — my — last bottle," gasped Kilada, "I'll—kill yuh, yuh fool!"

"He's no fool!" cried another voice. "He has sense enough to not be stolen!"

It was a girl's voice. From that pitching, back-firing and side-lunging bucker Kilada looked up. He saw a tall, golden-haired girl of eighteen standing on the rim of the coulee with bright blue eyes watching him over the long barrel of a Winchester rifle. A pretty girl, slender as a whip, and dressed in brown, but there

was cold fire in those eyes watching him —a girl who would shoot first and ask questions afterwards!

The sweat popped now. But this bronc had to be brought down. He kept riding, swaying, rocking and reeling loosely, taking it all with his shoulders. At last the horse bawled. With a final lightning spin he halted wide-legged, facing the girl, as Kilada quickly eased out of the saddle and stood there, surveying the girl with a look of half-humorous appraisal in his glance.

"I ain't stealin' this hoss, kid." Kilada eased his right hand forward, patting the horse's neck. "I'm only borrowin' the brute."

"Not yet!" snapped the girl. "That horse belongs to my father—"

"Yo're Jawn's gal, then?" he cut in, looking up quickly. "Yuh must be Jane. I think I used to call yuh Runt. Been twelve years since I saw yuh. Had hair then that looked like the calves chawed it. Say, put down that gun! Yuh want me to turn loose this hoss an' spank yuh? I'm kinfolks, though I ain't never bragged about it. I'm Heck Kilada, yore second cousin, yuh fool!"

The girl's eyes widened, muzzle of the rifle lowering. *"Hector!"*

"Naw, it ain't Hector!" he snarled. "It's Heck, plain Heck, nothin' but *Heck!"*

"Heck!" The girl had suddenly dropped her rifle. Now she was sliding down the bank. She came forward, catching him by the shoulders. "Good old Heck! Come on! I'll snake this horse up beside mine to keep him from pitching, or you can ride behind me on mine. Dad and mother are dying to see you. They've been thinking you'd never get here."

"Just get away from me," he scowled. "I started out to ride this fool hoss, an' ride 'im I will, without havin' to use a spindle-shanked gal like yuh an' her bronc for a snubbin' pole. Gimme room, Runt!"

CHAPTER THREE

Forty Rods from Hell!

HE REMOUNTED the bay with the girl moving back to the coulee rim to pick up her rifle. It was the same as it had been before. The bay set his feet, humped his back, and again uncorked the lightning. But this time Kilada never spurred, nor touched the heavy Spanish quirt hanging to his saddle horn. He talked, low-voiced and soothing, and soon it was over with the bay pulling himself out of it with a snort.

"I think he's beginning to like you, Heck!" laughed the girl, now appearing on the rim mounted on a black pony.

As if answering the girl, something cut through the air just above Kilada's head with a sharp *zz-ee-yumm-plop!* It was a bullet with the distant crash of a rifle in the hills to eastward. The bullet had struck a tree not far away. In an instant another followed it.

The bay started pitching again before Kilada could throw himself out of his saddle, and the one thing next to impossible for a rider to do was to leave a pitching horse without being thrown off completely. As a third bullet came, this time with a sharp, ringing sound as it glanced on the saddle horn, the bay took the sudden notion to go forward in a series of high-kicking jumps.

It was a rush that carried both the horse and his rider to safety behind a deep break in the north bank of the coulee. Kilada sawed the bay to a halt, and swung out of his saddle to start clawing for his own old Winchester in its boot under his left stirrup leather. But a quick shot from the girl's rifle beat him to it.

Jane Harper had slipped out of her saddle, run a few yards, and had dropped flat on her stomach in a thick cluster of jackpines. She had fired a second and a third shot before Kilada darted up beside

her and dropped to his knees with his rifle.

"Spot 'im to me with a shot!" he ordered. "They don't waste a heap of time tryin' to get things done 'round here, do they!"

"He's gone, Heck," answered the girl. "I got only a glimpse of whoever it was up there—the coward! It's always the way they do it. They never come out in the open."

"Yuh don't know who it is, huh?" he scowled. "An' me here with a hoss I can't chase a man on! Say, just before I forget it, there ain't been nobody out about Jawn's askin' for me lately, has there? Maybe some nosey feller, totin' a badge?"

"There was, yes," she nodded. "A sheriff's posse from Walking Horse, about four o'clock this morning. They didn't ask for you by name, of course, but dad and mother each said afterwards that they had a notion you were somewhere close by on the wing. That *was* you in Junction City, wasn't it? And they—"

"Now yuh wait, Runt!" He caught her by the arm. "I was in Junction City, yeah. I was mindin' my own business, an' the law nosed in. 'Fore I could bat an eye, six men had me surrounded with guns an' all itchy-fingered to shoot. But I had nothin' to do with no train hold-up, an' let that be final. I held up one train, as Jawn'll be so glad to tell yuh, but that was years an' years ago. I've deformed since then, an' follow only the straight an' narrow."

He glanced back at the hills to eastward, "let's get outa here. Yuh can talk as we ride. I don't like to be mounted on a half-broke bronc when I'm bein' shot at from the bushes. Jawn said he had rustler troubles when he wrote to me, an' of course it'd take a Kilada to pull a Harper's nose outa the fire . . . !"

As they swung away the girl started talking, keeping it up in almost a constant stream until they reached the rim of a broad, deep valley with a swift river showing ahead a mile away.

"Looks about the same as the last time," chuckled Kilada when they saw houses and corrals in the distance on a high flat above the river's rim. "Still, if memory ain't foolin' me, there does seem to be a heap of the little pines missin' from all the coulees on that tall jump-up of hills just west of the river. Jawn been cuttin'?"

"Had to!" answered the girl. "Those dark thickets made too good a cover for the ghost riders I've been telling you about. They're on the sneak-about night and day, and they kill when there's a chance. It's a funny job of rustling we have on our hands now, Heck."

"Must be, from all yuh say," he agreed. "It ain't just a plain job, Runt. Somebody's backin' the rustlers, an' whoever it is—well, they're big folks with something big on their minds. Not just cows an' hosses. Somebody wants this valley. Yuh say they ain't botherin' anything else—just the folks along the river. That makes a man think. Gimme time, Runt. I'll get to the bottom of it."

"Dad and mother believe in you, Heck!"

He fired her a dubious glance. "They believe I oughta been hung years ago—an' can't see why I ain't been. But outa yuh I get more'n I'd get outa Jawn in an hour of talkin'. Things are fairly clear to me even right now. Yuh watch a Kilada take his bull by the horns, Runt. There are times when, old as I am, I even surprise myse'f!"

* * *

YES, it's Heck, at last, Elizabeth!" exclaimed long and thin John Harper as he sat in a home-made wheel-chair on the west porch of the old house with a tall, raw-boned woman beside him. "Jane found him somewhere.

For heaven's sake, don't start a fight with him the first thing!"

Shot through the back and left for dead the month before by a dry-glucher, John Harper could not help but smile in spite of the dull pain that was still between his shoulder blades. He recognized the horse Kilada was riding.

It was when Kilada and the girl were pulling up in front of the house that the trouble took place. As if waiting for just such a thing, the bay's head went down. Bawling as if suddenly gone mad, the horse started pitching furiously.

"There he goes!" yelled Harper. "Watch 'im fly!"

Caught with all the unexpectedness of it, Kilada had been tossed high in the saddle. For an instant he was like a man on his knees trying to pray on the back of a bucking bronco, then he was in the air, a big bullfrog thing scooting over the horse's head and plowing up a full three yards of sand in front of the porch. With the horse going on toward the corrals and the girl hot behind the bay to catch him, Kilada sat up, grinned from ear to ear, and took off his old hat to start pawing the dust out of his eyes.

"Howdy, Jawn!" he growled. "An' howdy, Liz. Nice mornin'."

"Yes, *Hector!*" answered the woman, war in her eyes at once. "You might as well understand it now that I still don't like to be called Liz. My name's *Elizabeth!*"

"The same old battle-axe!" Kilada glanced toward the corrals. "I see yo're still hen-pecked, Jawn, an' afraid to open yore mouth. Can't blame yuh. I allus feel just forty rods from hell with yore Liz around.

"It's the Sooner blood in 'er. Them Sooners was the worst hawg thieves we knowed in all Missouri, an' durned if yuh didn't have to up an' marry one! Say, what's that I see comin' down the river-bank?"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Posse

JOHN HARPER, forgot himself for a moment, trying to rise out of his chair only to slump back with a groan. "That's Art Swindell!" he exclaimed. "He's been sorter pinch-hittin' as boss over what's left of my range since Ben Plunkett got shot."

The rider, mounted on a long-legged roan, was a tall man, handsomely dressed in gray, his upper lip adorned by a dab of a mustache as he drew closer. A man in a daze, he sat rigidly on the horse with both hands pushed against the saddle horn, his face bleeding. The roan turned in toward the main corral, halting there at the high gate as Kilada hustled forward. Jane Harper appeared from the shadows of one of the big sheds.

"Take him on to the bunkhouse, Heck!" cried the girl. "We'll get hot water and be right with you!"

Kilada caught the roan by the bits, leading him on to the east side of the corrals and to the south door of the long log bunkhouse. Half-tearing the reins from the wounded man's hands, he dropped them, and then pulled the man out of the saddle.

"What goes on?" he exploded as he kicked open the half-open door of the bunkhouse with the wounded man in his

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arms. "Am I walkin' in on a hospittle?"

The bunkhouse looked it. There were four men lying in the line of three-tiered bunks against the wall to his right. Three others sat dejectedly in rickety chairs, one with his left arm in a sling, another with his right shoulder and his head bandaged, and the third—Harper's cowboss, a gray-bearded old man—sat with his left leg in a cast from the hip to the knee.

"More company, huh?" The man with a cast on his leg looked up with a scowl. "Well, we've still got room, I reckon. It's Art this time, boys, an' here we've been thinkin' he was about the only han' on the place who would never stop lead!"

The cowboss' keen blue eyes were like boring gimlets on Kilada's broad back as he walked on, sprawling his man on a bunk that was pointed out to him beside a window in the northeast corner.

"Looks like a butchered beef," muttered Kilada as he stepped back, now taking a long look at the wounded man. "Yuh fellas," he turned, brows knitting into quizzical lumps, "look like yo've been playin' with a lot of hard-luck around here, don't yuh? Yo've forgot me, I reckon?" He looked at the man with the leg in a cast. "Yo're Plunkett!"

"Don't think I don't know yuh!" snorted the older man. "I'd know that hide of yores in a tanyard. Fact is, we even smelled yuh comin' a mile away. Some of the boys said it was a hydrophobia polecat. I said it was worse. What're yuh doin' back here? I thought yuh an' John was through for keeps, an' we was rid of yore onery carcass forever."

"Same old ha'nt, ain't yuh?" Kilada grunted. "When I look at yuh, Ben Plunkett, I still say nature sometimes does queer an' shameful things."

The door opened at that moment. Jane Harper and her mother came hurrying in with a pail of hot water. The girl turned, taking down an old medicine chest from over the door.

"He's just sorter knocked anti-godlin'," explained Kilada. "A bullet hit 'im smack-dab on the bridge of the beezer. I'll look after his hoss."

Going outside he stood there eyeing the roan. Kilada took an old gunnysack from a peg under the overhang of the roof at the side of the bunkhouse. He rubbed the saddle clean and dry, then mounted the horse and turned quietly away.

He was gone for almost two hours, heading back up the river. When he returned, he rode straight to the bunkhouse to unsaddle, then turned the roan into a big haystack corral. John Harper, his wife and daughter were watching him from the porch when he turned up the slight slope to the house.

Kilada seated himself on the edge of the porch. "How long have yuh knowed yore handsome jaybird down there?" He jabbed his calloused thumb toward the bunkhouse.

"Art Swindell's been with us more than a year!" shot in Elizabeth Harper. "Don't come here as usual and start finding fault with every man who rides for us! I told John it would mean trouble when he sent for you!"

"Wait, now!" John Harper held up his hands. "Don't you two start. Leave him alone, Elizabeth, an' yuh leave her alone, Heck. Just go on with what yuh had on yore mind. What'd yuh find?"

"Runt, yuh know where we was shot at, don't yuh?" Kilada looked up at the girl. "An' yuh know where yuh went into action before I could get off that fool bay? Well, blood drops lead all the way from here to within two hundred yards of the spot yuh was shootin' at."

"I don't—don't believe it!" The girl stamped the porch with her spiked heels.

"Thought yuh wouldn't," nodded Kilada. "I noticed yuh was right scared an' concerned when that roan brought the jaybird in. He is sorter handsome in a bronc-stompin' way, I'll admit, but—oh,

well!" He waved his hands emptily. "With no family brains behind yuh to speak of, one can't expect too much."

"Hold on, hold on!" Harper warned. "Don't nobody move just yet. Heck, my chair an' the wimminfolks sorter hides yuh, but yo've got to duck inside. Sorter peek around me an' look down the valley where that high ridge reaches acrost from the east to the river. Another posse's comin'. This time Sheriff Butch Bradlee's at the head of it. An' Butch won't stop at nothin' until he gets yuh!"

* * *

I WASN'T with the boys when they stopped here last night, Harper," Sheriff Bradlee said, "but I'm here now, and I'm hunting a man. We're going to look your place over from top to bottom."

John Harper was speechless for almost thirty seconds. He watched the tall, broad-shouldered sheriff slip out of his saddle. Young, blond and blue-eyed, thick of neck and square of jaw, there was something handsome about the man in spite of his arrogant way.

He stood there, scowling to the right and left, dressed in shiny black, handsome six-shooters at his hips, and looking more like a rich eastern dude than a former Montana cowboy. Ten heavily armed men sat their horses in front of the porch with leering smiles on their faces.

"Yuh seem right concerned about yore man," Harper's voice trembled with ill-held rage, "but when things happen to us, like our rangelands turned to a hoss-pittle with men shot down from behind an outa their doorways at night—well, that doesn't make yuh sweat. Yuh just don't give a hoot!"

"That bird stole my Lightning Streak horse last night, Harper!"

"It was 'Mister Harper this,' an' Mister Harper that' when yuh was easin' around for votes!" The cattleman laughed mirthlessly. "I've just had another man shot, Butch. That don't count, does it?"

"My Lightning Streak," the sheriff's eyes narrowed, "was found with one of your herds a short time ago, Harper! I've sent him back to Walking Horse with one of my men."

"That's good!" nodded the cattleman. "But, at that, yuh ain't worried about me gettin' another man shot. It don't look good to me, Butch. To me, a man is worth a sight more than a hoss. An' yore shiny badge won't bring yuh into my house without a search warrant!"

A six-shooter had appeared in his right hand covering the sheriff. "If anybody takes a shot at me I'll drop yuh dead, Butch. Yo're goin' to lis'en to me now, smart fella. Yuh know, yoreself, that gunmen have flocked in from ever'where.

"Our men have been shot, an' our herds have been run off under our noses. Our brands have been tampered with, only to make neighbors fall out an' fight. An' we're otherwise whittled down so's we soon won't be able to fight anybody—"

"Wait a minute, Harper!" broke in the sheriff, his lips white. "Your personal troubles are not my troubles. I—"

A shot cut him off, and a bullet took a hand in the quarrel from high on one of the hills just west of the river. One of the sullen riders behind Bradlee suddenly stiffened in his saddle. His mouth swung open for a cry of pain that never came. He came plunging to the ground on his head and shoulders.

It was like a signal for a burst of firing. A horse bawled, staggered, and dropped to its knees. Another man stiffened in his saddle before falling.

Stricken by the unexpectedness of it, the horses were going crazy in a moment, and they were suddenly a pitching, lunging and colliding mass of brutes in front of the porch, with men yelling their heads off, shouting and cursing.

"Take cover!" bawled the sheriff. "Get behind something! Some fool's tryin' to wipe us out!"

"Head for the corrals an' sheds!" yelled Harper, backing his makeshift wheelchair to the front door. "Here, fool!" He snarled Bradlee as he saw the man start to run after the horsemen. "In a pinch like this yuh can come just inside the house!"

CHAPTER FIVE

A Hot Spot for Heck!

HECK KILADA, the woman and the girl, had made a quiet fade-away long before the posse arrived. With Harper slowly backing his chair to the doorway, Kilada had kept behind it and crawled on into the living room.

Staying there had not appealed to him, even with Jane Harper and her mother suddenly offering to hide him in a big feather bed in a rear room. He had gone on through the bedroom and out a window.

Keeping the big house between him and the posse, he had made it to the stables to take up his old Winchester just in case.

He had heard every word that had passed between Harper and the sheriff. He had seen the first man stiffen from the unexpected bullet from across the river, and now the mob charging toward the corrals was something to get away from as quickly as possible.

Scooting out the rear of a long shed, Winchester cradled across his left arm, he headed for the first haystack, and plowed himself under it like a rabbit burrowing itself into a hole as the sounds of shooting kept rolling over the valley and the possemen started returning the fire in staggering bursts of shots.

A bullet came slapping into the haystack a moment after Kilada had crawled into it. Some one up there on the high, ragged hill west of the river had seen him enter his hiding place. He screwed himself deeper in his burrow, and cursed the straw poking down the back of his neck in gouging needles.

Getting far back under the hay was the best thing that could have happened. Two of the possemen were suddenly deserting the others under the sheds. Kilada heard them smashing and tearing into the eastern side of the stack, plowing deep holes in the hay. They were within a yard of Kilada before they stopped. He lay there listening to them pant for nearly a minute before one of them started cursing.

"I told Butch!" half-whimpered the man, "the rest of the boys on the other side of the fence in this thing think that gun-bust last night in the canyon was a double-cross on our parts. But how is the bunch left out in the hills goin' to know it was that fool sheriff from Junction City instead of Butch an' us who made the wipe-out?"

"There ain't no way of 'em knowin'," agreed the second man. "Not with Butch makin' 'em all keep to the hills an' canyons of late. I wish we'd never heard of that fool railroad, Lige."

"So do I!" The first speaker swore huskily. "Three men killed outright, four shot, an' four jailed—an' half of Walkin' Horse cryin' to hang 'em. Lately, Jude, I can't trust Butch as I want to. He could have held back that Junction City bunch if he hadn't spent all his time goin' crazy over his race horse bein' stole. There are times when I think he's scared."

"There're times when I know I am, Lige. There's too much money in this thing. I ain't used to hearin' men talk about money in hundred thousand dollar figures. Now an' then I catch myself talkin' to myself. I say, 'Jude Butler, what's to hinder yuh bein' bumped out o

the picture at the right time, so's yuh won't get nothin'? Suppose yuh an' the others do run every rancher outa the valley along the river, an' the Junction City National does take over, an' the crooked railroad crowd does step in? What,' I keep askin' myself, 'is to hinder 'em from wipin' all of yuh out an' givin' yuh nothin'?' We couldn't say a word, could we?"

"All any of us would get," agreed the man called Lige, "would be a right fast hangin' bee for our pains. But that ain't worryin' me. What does worry me is that the railroad crowd may decide to kill us all off 'fore we take any fool notions to talk. That can happen *any* time. The job's about done, the Junction City National's loaned money for these dudes to fight rustlers with, an'. . . . Say, don't I smell somethin' burnin'?"

Kilada swore under his breath as the talk of railroad crooks and rustlers came to a quick end. He wanted to hear more about it. But there was something burning. It was powder, as any fool could tell that by the smell.

Those posse buzzards left under the sheds were still shooting like maniacs, and the smoke under the sheds was getting thick enough to be cut in chunks. Some of the men still fighting were openly cursing the men up there on the hill, and now beginning to yell encouragement to those wounded cowboys in the bunkhouse who were able to crawl to a window with rifles and join the fighting.

He would have seen that it was worse than that, had he been on the north side of a second big haystack behind him. A smoke-spitting streak cut through the air from a deep little ravine and traveled in a long curve to the haystack. It struck like a shooting star just inside the hay, and fire of a dozen colors crackled and exploded in every direction.

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Right behind that first shooting star came another, then a stream of them hissing through the air. Some of them went over the first haystack, striking the north side of the one in which Kilada and the two possemen were hiding. But Kilada had no knowledge of this until one, rising higher than the others, sailed on over his haystack to strike a post at the corner of one of the sheds. There it broke into a hundred flying fragments of flame.

"Now *whut!*" he whispered, staring out through the ragged hole he had made in the hay. "It looked like a star from one of them Roman candle things some folks shoot at Fourth o' July or Christmas time."

He could tell that the possemen taking shelter in the south ends of the sheds were too excited to see or hear anything except the bursting rings of gunsmoke on the hill, and the cry and slap of bullets.

Kilada, alone, smelled the burning hay. It came to him as a north wind whisked around his haystack. Hunched back there on his hands and knees, it came to him suddenly that the seat of his trousers was getting hot. He wiggled himself to one side on his knees, and looked back to see eyes of flame cutting through the hay.

"Fire!" He was like a bucking steer with his hind-quarters smoking as he came out of the hay in three knee-springing jumps. "Yuh fools, can't yuh see nothin'! They're only makin' yuh keep yore eyes on that hill over there while they set fire an' burn us up from behind. Water, *water!*"

* * *

WITH his old Winchester across his arm and the weapon ready to let drive in any direction, he did not stop. The posse fools under the sheds and those two men in the hay could see what was happening by this time, and to save some of their faces they would have to start fighting fire.

Bullets from beyond the river kicked up spurts of dust around him as he headed for the ravine where two big Roman candles fastened in the crotch of a little pine were still shooting fire. He reached them, at once kicking them down into the ravine, then leaping after them to hurl them into a little pool of water not far away.

He had just finished that job when a rifle bullet slapped a hole through his hat from straight down the ravine. It was the man who had evidently placed the Roman candles in the crotch. As the bullet slapped, Kilada went down—an old trick that rarely failed to get results.

The would-be killer was on the other side of a tall black horse. As the man swung into his saddle, evidently thinking he had made a perfect hit, Kilada went into action. Flat on his stomach in the sand, he brought up his Winchester. There was a split-second's aim, a quick but firm squeeze of the trigger, and the long-rolling crash of his shot. A bullet drove straight to its mark. The man getting on the horse threw up his hands and hurled backward, into the stream.

With the deep banks now protecting him, Kilada headed across the river. With the water coming to his stirrups, he made the brush-choked mouth of another ravine after a few rods. He plowed the black into it, looking back across the river. Men were fighting the burning haystacks with a fury now that promised that the fire would soon be out. A grin streaked his face, and vanished at once.

For it was then that a bullet struck him. The muzzle of a black .45 had been jammed forward over a pile of rocks and brush ahead of him, no more then thirty feet away. He felt the horse pitch, felt his old Winchester slip from across his lap, and he was reeling backward with a stabbing pain shooting through the side of his head.

"Winged 'im, that's all!" snarled a voice a few moments later.

"No matter!" said a tall, wolfish-looking individual with a black beard. "Rock can use 'im—maybe. Pile 'im back on that saddle, an' let's 'im away from here!"

★ ★ ★

SOMETHING told him he was being carried over the hills to westward. That would be straight for the Back Country—one of the wildest sections of straight-up-and-down mountains, deep canyons, black gorges and impassible hills within more than a hundred miles. But there was no way for him to tell how long he had been riding.

In places the horses galloped. In others they seemed to creep along dangerous high trails in the sides of dark canyons where at times the sounds of water came from far below.

An old gunman, on to all the tricks, Kilada was fully conscious for the last two hours of the ride. But no man would have suspected it, for he was like something dead and roped across the big saddle.

"Watch ever'thing now!" a voice finally warned, and Kilada knew his captors had dismounted to lead the horses over dangerous rocks. "I feel my hair standin' on end ever'time I come in this back way. A man can fall a straight mile here, Rube."

Cool darkness closed around them almost at once, and the sounds of the hoofs became dull hammer blows on a drum.

Kilada cracked his eyes open from time to time. The light of a lantern flickered ahead of him. Drops of water from somewhere tapped against the back of his head like ice. It was gone in a few minutes, but a spilling sound took its place, marking an underground waterfall close by. After it was gone there was a brief halt, and then—with the captors remounting their horses—the pace was increased to a trot.

Hoarse yells and cries of pain and terror came to Kilada after they had gone another mile. He soon heard something that could not be anything to his keen old ears except the lashing of a whip. Somebody was catching it.

"Don't—don't!" groaned a choking voice. "I—I can't stand it no more! I—I can't, I tell yuh!"

"Will you sign, without any more argument?" snarled another voice.

Lights came right after that. Kilada kept his eyes open long enough to take stock of what was ahead of him.

He saw a huge underground room with monstrous shapes carved into the high many-colored walls. At the opposite end of the room was the strongest light. There at the foot of what looked like a huge Buddha on a throne was a long stone table. On that table lay the figure of an old man, his back bare, his hands fastened to the edges. A man stood over him with a long bullwhip.

It was an ancient ceremonial chamber of some long-departed Indian tribe. The more Kilada saw of it, the more he was convinced. Great clans had gathered here, thousands of years before the coming of the first white man. Here, in short, was the temple of some race—Sun Worshippers, the Snake People, the Fire Clans or the Devil Dancers. Kilada had heard of dozens of such breeds of humanity—even to the cannibal tribes once known to have existed among the red men.

Men, and even a woman here and there, were chained to the walls. Some of them were so thin and worn they looked like ghost people. Here was where a hell on the earth existed. Those people were ranchers! And this was clearing up some of the things Jane Harper had said.

"Some of the ranchers, especially the smaller ones," the girl had explained when Kilada was riding on to the ranch with her, "have just disappeared. No

one knows what happened to them, and our handsome-and-know-it sheriff of Walking Horse only makes a pretense of looking for them. He always says they've slipped out, deserting all they've worked so hard for because somebody has scared them. We don't see it like that. Some are people who would never run, and dad says they've been killed and dropped into holes where they're never going to be found."

And these people, these prisoners were the ones the girl had talked about! There was no doubt about it from the beginning, and the excitement and talk of the big room made it positive.

"What have you there? Don't tell me it's John Harper at last!"

The speaker was a big man seated at another broad rock table to the right of the stone throne.

A glance at him would have told any cowboy or cattleman that he was not a Westerner. A broad white hat was on his head, a huge cigar was in the side of his mouth, and broad cartridge belts sagged away under his long-tailed coat. But the true brand of the Westerner was sorely missing in his carefully shaved and powdered face, manicured nails, and even in the cut of his clothing. To Kilada he looked like some tinhorn tenderfoot playing badman—and not doing it very well.

"It ain't Harper," answered one of the men who had brought Kilada in. "We can't drag 'im right off his porch, sick as he still is. We picked up this duck after he'd shot Bruce Sikes when Bruce was makin' his getaway from settin' them haystacks afire. We didn't know but what he might mean somethin' to yuh, Rock."

"He may at that, Rock!" Another man had come forward. "He's the duck I was tellin' yuh about—the one they jailed in Junction City as a train-robber suspect. I was there, yuh know, when he busted outa town."

"Put him away to cool!" ordered the man in the white hat. "You can take that man off the table and pour a drink of whiskey into him. When his nerve steadies he can sign on the dotted line. Bring up George Boland again. We'll see if he still thinks he's hard enough to stand against me."

"No, please, Mr. Gardner!" An old woman against the wall started crying. "I've signed. George will when he's feelin' better. Lord, can't you see he's been hurt so bad he's out of his mind and don't know what he's saying when he cusses back at you?"

"Listen, old woman!" The answering voice was as cold and hard as a stone. "Back in the East even the police know that Rock Gardner doesn't stop, once he starts. We may not do things back there according to your Western ways, but we get what we want."

His voice lifted to a crash. "Bring George Boland forward. This time he does as I say, or. . . ."

CHAPTER SIX

Prisoners of Doom

A BURLY gunman untied Kilada, slid off the saddle, and the horses were led away to another underground room. "We've got a heap bigger fish to fry right now, an' more are on the way, if the look-out's eyes ain't foolin' 'im on the peak."

A chain rattled as it was dragged forward. It was given two swift turns around Kilada's left ankle, then locked in place. He did not move. A man would learn more keeping still.

Cracking open one eye, he took stock of his surroundings again. Some of the people chained to the wall already looked like skeletons in chains! Probably being starved half to death as well as given a daily manhandling to swing them in line.

He remembered name after name as they were called out. He saw George Boland dragged forward, and only by name would he have known him. Boland owned the big Diamond B horse outfit south of John Harper's and right on the river.

The last time Kilada had seen him he had been a big, strapping fellow. Now he looked like a dazed buzzard with half its feathers gone.

"It's your last chance, Boland!" Rock Gardner was bullying again. "Sit down. Give him a shot of whiskey, boys."

"This won't be legal," muttered Boland. "This ain't fair. The law—won't uphold it."

"We're the law, Boland!" snapped Gardner. "You fools had a chance to sell. You muffed that chance, and now you know a railroad's going to come up the river from Junction City and stretch all the way to Thunder Pass. You're selling us the land, and we're selling it to the railroad company."

Boland broke and wept, an odd thing to see that hard-fisted old-timer do. But he had no choice. No man in this hell-hole had a choice. Kilada saw that at once. Eastern toughs had moved in on an otherwise quiet country. And in this prison, among these chained ranchers, only a fool would try to fight the boss.

Boland signed papers that were thrust in front of him. Kilada saw him led away, then another man was shuffled forward, with his wife beside him. These people were signing over everything they owned along the river.

Now and then a man was told something would be given back to him; all the railroad wanted was a right of way up the valley. But these people, Kilada knew, would never be allowed to leave this place. Death would come to them here when everything was done, so that the outside world would never know what had happened to them.

An hour passed before Kilada was hauled forward. To keep from having icy water spilled all over him, he was forced to pretend that he was just returning to consciousness. Two men helped him to his feet. He was juggled forward, and thrown into an ancient stone seat across the huge table from Rock Gardner.

"So you're supposed to be a stick-up artist?" began the man. "Just what did you get out of that hold-up in Cradle Canyon, chum?"

"Who, me?" Kilada shook his head groggily, still pretending to be in something of a daze. "Why, sheriff, I've said I wasn't there, don't know nothin' about it."

"What's your name!" snapped Gardner. "Come on, spill it! I'm no sheriff, but we might be able to use you. It was quite a haul, I hear, that you boys made. Four men taking a sixty thousand dollar

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payroll off the Westbound Limited! I'd say you had nerve—and about fifteen thousand hid out somewhere. We might like to see the color of some of that money, chum."

Quarreling voices and the rough march of booted and spurred feet interrupted them before Kilada could think of an answer. Two more prisoners were being brought in, and evidently they had been brought in through some passageway Kilada had not yet seen.

One of them looked as if he was dying on his feet. The other was bloody-faced, cold eyes blazing, and his hands roped behind his back.

At the first glimpse, Kilada recognized him. It was Old Joe Henning, the sheriff of Junction City, and the near-dead man with him was a deputy.

"Honored, I'm sure!" Rock Gardner was suddenly on his feet. "I suppose, Henning, you're quite surprised to see me here?"

"I ain't!" declared the old sheriff. "Yuh was too close to Nate Crowder in the Junction City National. Furthermore, I didn't like yore looks from the start. What's yore play? Yuh might get over with it an' save time." Then he glowered at Kilada, "What are you doin' here; plannin' another train robbery?"

"Leastwise," glowered back Kilada, "I ain't figurin' on goin' back to yore jailhouse. Somethin' tells me I'm in better company. An' furthermore, yore deppity had no business tryin' to come in the jail an' beat me up, even if my past might be a little shady."

* * *

QUARRELING with the sheriff, sometimes cursing him with oaths strong enough to singe a man's hair, helped him with the outlaws. Before long, especially with Rock Gardner breaking into it from time to time, he could tell that the old time lawman was not a dumb critter by a long shot. Henning was soon taking the bait, actually helping the play along.

"I know yuh now!" finally roared the sheriff. "Yuh may not be one of the gang what knocked over the Overland. Some of this bunch here mighta been in that job, for all I know. But I do know this: Yuh stuck up a certain bank in Wyomin' all by yore lonesome, an' yuh got away with seventy thousand dollars! Yo've got that money hid out."

"Yuh ain't the duck to find it, if I have!"

"Maybe not," cut in Gardner, "but maybe some of my men will be. Take them away, boys. Interesting pair we've got. One's certain money, it seems, and the other," his eyes narrowed as he looked at the sheriff, "sure won't be bothering us again."

Three hours later, Sheriff Buck Bradlee was brought in, Kilada and Joe Henning sat chained at the far end of the room. Once they were fighting, and guards had to kick them apart. They quarreled from time to time, cursing each other when guards were close enough to hear them.

Buck Bradlee's hands were bound behind his back. Somebody had struck him across the face with a six-shooter. Kilada listened as closely as he could, and learned by the talk that he had tried to desert his men at Harper's ranch, and had been made a prisoner shortly after.

"We've used you as a tool, yes!" Gardner was finally admitting to Bradlee. "The same goes for the most of your gang, Buck. But you were a shade too high and mighty for your job. When this thing's done, only the men that I hired and brought here personally will be left in the swim. There's a fortune at stake, but it wouldn't be a fortune—as any fool would know—if its split among all the thick-heads we've had to use. You're through, Butch!"

"You'll never get away with it, Rock!" The young sheriff laughed bitterly. "In my safe I have letters to hang you if you try a double-cross. I'm the only man who knows how to open that safe. An uncle of mine in Helena has a letter to open in case anything happens to me. In that letter is the combination and a hint that he will find out what has happened to me."

He laughed again, a man cocksure of himself." When I play with rats like you and Nate Crowder—well, I have a trap set, just in case you turn on me."

"I said you were a fool, and now you prove it!" Rock Gardner sat back and laughed. "Throw him across that table boys. About twenty licks on the back—even three or four if I know a yellow cur when I see one—will give us that combination."

★ ★ ★

KILADA was hustled forward again. He knew how to play the fool, and he played it, getting right down to chumminess with the men around the table. He had seen Buck Bradlee give up at the third stroke of the whip, and had seen him stagger weakly away.

"We'll keep you for a while!" Gardner had laughed, "just to make sure you're not lying about the combination. After that, you'll be like the rest of the sheep we leave here. A few sticks of dynamite will seal this place forever, and you'll be here with the others to hear that dynamite go of."

"Does me good to see yuh work," now cackled Kilada, taking the liberty to reach over and pat Gardner encouragingly on the shoulder.

He had had his head bandaged. They had given him four heavy drinks of whiskey, and it looked as if he was already three-fourths drunk. "Been more'n ten years since I've rid for a boss like yuh. An' of course I'll throw in with yuh an' the boys. Glad to. The law-squirt was right about that bank job, too. I've got all the money hid out, high an' dry in a canyon no more'n eighty miles from here."

"Sure, he's got everything, Rock! Pretty soon he'll be telling you he has started sprouting wings!"

The voice was a strange voice falling on Kilada's ears. He turned and stared. For a moment he did not recognize the newcomer standing in a dark opening to the left of the Buddha-like idol.

A bandage covered the bridge of the man's nose, making a wad that was sticking out like a white horn. Then it came to Kilada that he had seen that wicked little strip of mustache—and he recognized Art Swindell!

"It would be nice to have Heck Kilada working with you!" Swindell laughed. "But he's no outlaw, Rock. He's supposed to be a born trouble-buster—and he's the man I told you John Harper had sent for!"

"The lying rat!" Rock Gardner was on his feet with a jerk. "I'll show him how to play me! You've only hit doom here, Kilada!"

A scream came then, and Kilada saw Jane Harper. She was just behind Swindell, and behind the girl was her mother and John Harper, looking like a ghost as he hung on his wife's right arm, with two burly gunmen just behind him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bat-Out-of-Hell!

ONLY a fool's choice was left for Kilada, any direction he turned. Not to have moved instantly would have been to be shot down. Running seemed equally foolish, but his hands were free, and they had had to remove the chain from his ankle every time they brought him to the big rock table.

There was an old kerosene lamp on the table between him and Gardner, probably stolen from some rancher's line cabin. With a lightning blow, Kilada struck it, smashing it upward with his fist. It flew straight into Gardner's face, and the chimney of the lamp broke.

Gardner snarled as the hot splinters of glass filled his face and eyes, and Kilada ducked as a six-shooter roared at him from the hand of a gunman at the table.

An instant later, Art Swindell must have thought a cyclone had struck him, for Kilada was down like a charging bull. His head plowed between Swindell's arrogantly braced legs, arms scooping out to catch them. Swindell was buckled forward, jack-knifed across Kilada's big shoulders and sprawled down his back—and the human bull was charging on, brushing the Harpers out of the way and hurling the two guards behind them against the wall.

"Look out for the hole, Art!" Somebody yelled that as if Swindell could do something about it.

Kilada kept going, knowing that no one could shoot him now without hitting Swindell. But he had gone more than forty feet before he struck a place where the rocks were wet and slippery underfoot. Swindell was crying out something about the danger ahead, and still struggling like a fighting snake on Kilada's shoulders and back.

Suddenly Kilada's feet were flying from under him, and as if jerked forward by invisible hands he was out in space with Swindell still on his back.

"They're gone!" wailed a voice behind them. "Rock! Rock, he carried Art right into the hole!"

Other voices roared, but Kilada did not hear them. He was plunging and turning through cold black space, trying to push Swindell away from him. Two wheeling shapes in the blackness, they shot on.

Icy blades of pain suddenly broke the fall, and something splashed high in the air around them. . . .

* * *

JOHN HARPER, I'll kill you inch by inch for this! That was my kid brother who went into that hole!" Rock Gardner was on his feet, a six-shooter in one hand and a quart of whiskey in the other.

"Yuh don't need to tell us who he was, Mr. Gardner." Harper had come on to the table with his wife and daughter, and had slumped upon the long stone where Kilada had been sitting. "Art told us. Him an' two men, yuh see, waited until dark to do their job. Two of the men with Butch Bradlee knowed yuh wasn't aimin' to cut 'em in on the money. Our little shot-up crowd in the bunkhouse couldn't help us when they drawed their guns on us in the main house."

He sighed as he glanced up at the ceiling, "An' Heck said—or as good as said, that Art was a snake. He tried to kill Heck this mornin'—or was it yesterday? But my wife an' daughter put that patch on Art's nose after he'd sneaked back to the ranch. Guess they woulda done most anything for Art. It's too bad, Art turnin' out like this. Too bad the way he abused us, once he come out in the open. We liked Art, Mr. Gardner. He shore had us fooled."

"Your wife," sneered Gardner, "thought he was going to marry your daughter! Well, he wasn't. He came out here four years ago to beat a murder rap—and started playing cowboy!"

He laughed, but the uproar drowned out the sound. Men had gone forward with ropes and lanterns, like creeping shadows, until they came to a fork in the passageway just behind the idol. Here, if Kilada had swung to the right, there would have been no danger at all, but not

knowing the place, the man had plunged straight on—to doom.

"Ain't a thing to be seen, Rock!" reported one of the gunmen as they came back to the huge room. "We lowered a lantern on a rope. That ol' hole looks deeper an' blacker than it ever did."

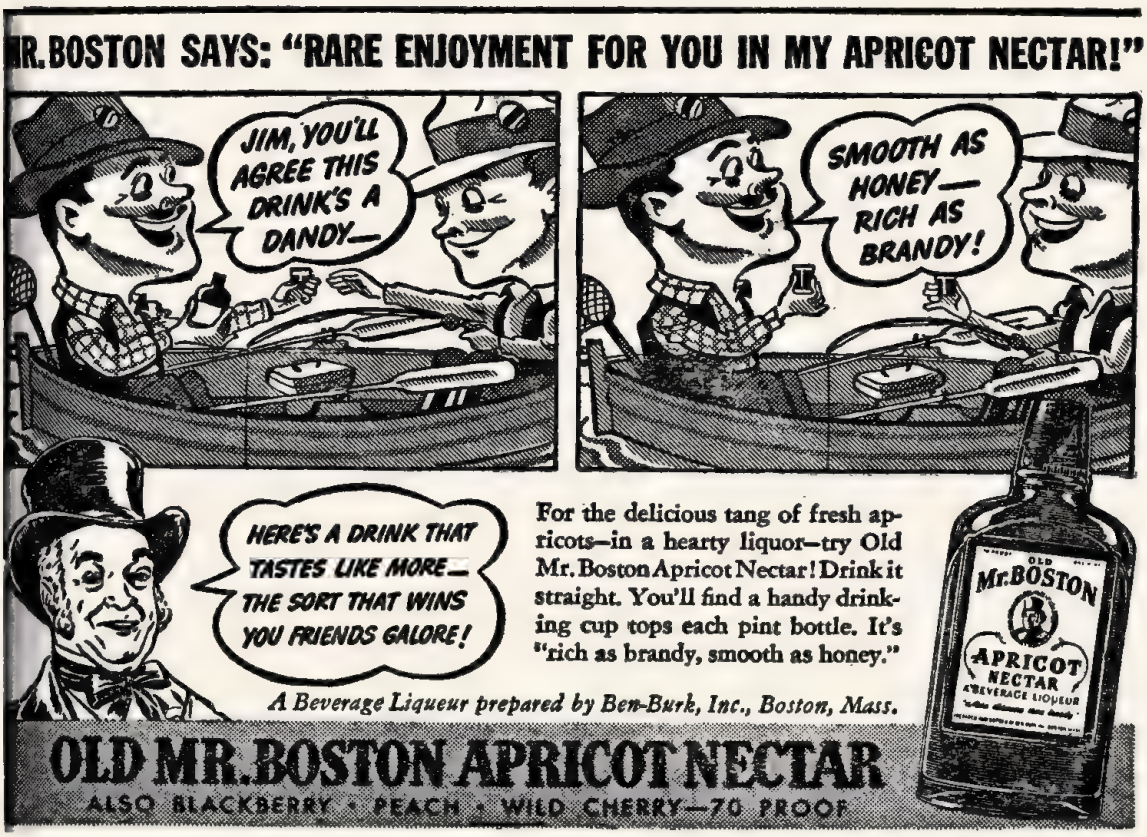
Gardner did not answer. He had raged and laughed by turns. Another lamp had been brought forward, and he had clawed the cork out of the bottle in his hand. His men were seeing him break for the first time now—seeing him tumble from his cold, high-horse dignity.

Suddenly he lifted the bottle, downed two thirds of its raw contents. With a snarl he sent the bottle flying across the table at Jane Harper's head. It missed the girl by inches, and shot on to smash against the rock wall behind her.

"You pretty little wench!" he cried. "Arthur was my kid brother, I tell you! I'll make you pay for his life, along with the others." He turned a madman stare on the old cattleman, "you'll know what it means to try to buck Rock Gardner. You'll pay for that buzzard you brought here to play me down. You devils! Take that girl and the woman, boys. Take them to the rock, and—"

Something stopped him. It was something that made every man in the room stiffen and hold his breath. It was a dull, reverberating sound, a soft thunder swelling over the room. For an instant it was as though a heavy rock had fallen somewhere, then a man pointed breathlessly toward the passageway beside the idol.

"The hole!" Gardner was on his feet with a jump. "Chain up this scum! Get more ropes! Get lanterns! We're going to the bottom of that hole if it takes all the rope in Montana. That was a shot! Arthur was—was," his voice hissed, "the only one carrying guns. Arthur—Arthur's alive down there!"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KILADA ducked as two more shots roared in the darkness. The first shot had been only to light the darkness, and Art Swindell had fired it. The men were hurled apart, both dazed at first. The shot showed them they were in a deep, round pit of black water. They were being carried around the rim of it like spinning chips in a whirlpool.

Art Swindell was shooting to kill now, and depending on the flashes of his twin .45's to show him his target. Kilada kept ducking and counting the shots. When six of them had roared he knew one of Art Swindell's handsome weapons was empty.

It was the last of the shots. By the flashes, Kilada had seen that they were being swept closer and closer to the center of the whirling pool. Suddenly there was a sensation of being whirled around and around in a funnel, and Kilada felt himself jerked downward, the water closing over his head. He was far, far down when he struck something soft, something alive, kicking, struggling and clawing.

That clawing and kicking thing was Art Swindell. Kilada closed with the man, unable to do anything else in that mad rush of water. It was like two wildcats fighting in the darkness a few moments later. They were hurled upward, racing like bullets, and thrown above the water, with moonlight and starshine glowing ahead of them through what seemed a tiny pinhole.

Kilada was like an old grizzly in the water now. Swindell still had an empty six-shooter in his hand. He struck Kilada a blind blow with it across the shoulder. An instant later Kilada had seized the six-shooter, wringing it out of the man's hand. With the light growing, he drove one solid, smashing blow to the side of Swindell's head, and the man was wilting in his grip.

From a mere pinpoint, the light ahead grew until it was a great, jagged hole in the side of a mile-high cliff. Before Kilada reached it, he had finished disarming Swindell. Now as the two were hurled out in the moonlight, he heard a vast roaring ahead. It became a waterfall spilling downward for more than five hundred feet over jagged rocks—and certain death to anything going over it.

Kilada twice released Swindell only to seize him again. He had no sympathy for the man, but the dim light of a flickering idea was already beginning to form in his mind. Art Swindell would know the way back up into that hell-hole, and without a man knowing the way, he might never find it.

Swinging to the right, fighting the currents with all his strength, Kilada headed for what looked like a break in the rock wall. His right hand finally caught a slab of rock. It pulled away as if the high walls at either hand were made of chalk, but he caught himself again, now scarcely forty feet above the waterfall, and this time he was able to drag himself and Swindell onto a ragged gash in the rocks and gradually out of the water.

"That dynamite!" Swindell was beginning to mutter as Kilada hauled him higher above the water and dropped him for a moment to rest. "I—I do like her, Rock. She's about the only good girl I ever knew. I—I saved you by coming out here. I took the blame. You know, I wasn't there. Go back and let me alone . . . It's under that center column. When it goes off it'll kill everybody in the place. Let—let her get out, Rock. . . ."

"A sock on the head," nodded Kilada, "an right away yuh start havin' hoss-sense. Why didn't yuh think of that before, yuh snake!"

Swindell was clawing for his hips a few minutes later as Kilada half-dragged and half-carried him on up through the break in the rocks. Kilada threw him down, and clamped a spurred foot on his chest.

"Lis'en to me, jaybird," he growled.

"I ain't no han' to take monkey business. I heard some of that dynamite talk up there. Yo're goin' to he'p me wind this thing up an' get them folks in the clear—or I aim to kill yuh."

A horse nickered somewhere above him. Taking no more chances now, he rolled Swindell over on his stomach, whipping his hands behind his back and lashing them in place with the man's belt. Now he placed Swindell's wet neckerchief in his mouth as a gag, and kicked him to his feet.

"An' no noise," he warned, "if yuh wanta keep alive!"

They moved on, and came to a big flat extending outward from the cliffs. A cigarette glowed ahead of them in a thicket of low trees. Kilada jerked his prisoner to a halt, then swung him to the right. When he left him, Swindell was fastened by one of his heavy gun-belts to the stout bole of a little pine.

"Remember now!" Heck snarled softly, "one word, an' I'll come back an' shoot yuh square betwix' the eyes."

A snake would not have been any quieter after that. Heck was down on his stomach, taking advantage of every blob of shadow cast by the moon and stars.

Gradually making his way higher on the flat, he came to a place where he could see seven or eight horses in the trees below. Here was a trail, too, one leading a winding course on up among the rocks. He arose, stepping quietly into it, and then walked toward the horses.

"That yuh, Dude?" A guard among the horses bounced to his feet, cupping his cigarette in his hand.

"Uh-huh!" grunted Kilada, blundering right on, and now beginning to hum an old tune. When he was thirty feet from the guard, Art Swindell's big six-shooters were filling his hands.

"Get 'em up, yuh! Pull the stars down! I'll know what I wanta know, before I'm done with a snake like yuh!"

He went to work at once, taking the terrified man's guns and making him flatten himself on his stomach and face on the ground. He was gentle enough about it at first, talking to the guard in a low voice as he strapped his hands behind him, dragged him away from the horses, and tied him to a tree. When he removed the man's boots and started to work it was clear to the guard just what Heck's plan was.

"I'll tell yuh," the guard finally sobbed. "There—there ain't but one way in, really. They just brought yuh in along a sort of a tunnel in the face of the cliffs. It bends in sharp, joinin' this trail inside the rocks, an' then enterin' the room behind that idol thing. I—I ain't lyin' to yuh, mister. I know that place like I know the palm of my hand.

"Yuh better know it," warned Kilada. "If I find yuh lied, I'll come back an' burn yuh alive. Yuh say that idol thing's hollow, huh? Yuh can go right up in the mouth of it an' look all over the big room? All right, it had better be like that. I'm liable to get mad if it ain't. An' when I get mad, mister. . . ."

He gagged the man, and then turned back up the trail, armed now with four heavy six-shooters. The trail was broad enough for horses to travel in single file, but the guard had said there were already too many horses up there.

Around a bend high above the guard, he suddenly ducked to one side as he heard footsteps coming. Clutching himself there in the shadows, he waited. A man came stumbling past him, and the man was mumbling to himself.

"Never saw a man in such a rage. I'll swear I believe he'll kill us all before he's done. He—*Ugh!*"

Kilada had stepped out behind the man. A six-shooter lifted and fell in his right hand, its blow flattening the man on the ledgelike trail.

A few moments later he had been robbed

of his guns. Kilada stood back, scratched his ear thoughtfully, then went on up the path.

* * *

ROCK GARDNER was raging at John Harper. "You thought you were a smart old boar, didn't you? You got suspicious and put all the other ranchers along the river on their guard. You were the peace-maker when I tried to make you valley ranchers fight. But my name's Rock. Like rock I am—*hard!*"

A long-drawn, mocking laugh answered him. For a second it was impossible to tell where it came from. Men leaped back.

Four jerking streaks of fire came from the mouth of the idol. Three men went down. A fourth man staggered, ran backward, stumbled and fell.

"Get 'em up!" The idol was laughing again. "High, an' pull the stars down!"

Another man clawed for his guns, but his hands clamped instead to the pit of his stomach. Another shot had roared out of the mouth of the idol, then another.

"Steady, Rock!" The idol laughed that hollow laugh again. "We've got yuh! The whole place is jammed with men."

"That's Kilada!" Rock Gardner's voice was like a scream. "That's Kilada, I tell you! He—he's inside that idol!"

Two men made a rush for it. Evidently Old Joe Henning had been forgotten, but the sheriff was sitting there was a six-shooter in each hand, weapons he had slipped from the holsters of the gunman who had just died across his lap. The old lawman sent two bursting gashes of flame across the room, and the two escaping renegades whirled and dropped.

"Just keep on gettin' killed!" laughed the idol. "Do yuh want it right now, Rock? Right betwix' the eyes, or do yuh wanta hang?"

"Get 'im!" snarled Gardner, eyes wide with terror. "That's Kilada, I tell you! *Get 'im!*"

"Why don't you get 'im?" cackled the old sheriff from Junction City. "Yuh know yuh can't, that's why! He's got the drop on ever'thing in this place. Better back up here to me an' let me take yore guns. Yuh ain't got the chance of a snowball in hell to beat this thing."

Gardner's voice was a wail. "Something told me to kill that devil! Something told me to—"

"An' now the Rock's cryin'!" laughed an old rancher. "Boys, how the stones do soften when once they start!"

* * *

Old Joe Henning was rubbing his back thirty minutes after it was over, "Kilada, I've been thinkin'. Yuh know, I've decided that yore burnin' of my jail was a plumb accident."

"It was," nodded Kilada. "I just hit yore deppity, an' he knocked over the stove while he was fallin'. But it don't pay to think, Hennin'. Just look yonder."

A wiry young cowboy had been released from the end of his chain and an outlaw locked to it to take his place. Jane Harper had been released almost at the same time. The girl was in the cowboy's arms now, tears raining down her face. Those two were in love, shore as shootin'!

"An' that takes the last fly outa the honey," nodded Kilada. "For a little while I was gettin' sorter simple-minded an' kind of tryin' to figure how I'd work one snake outa this mess. Old bats ain't got no business tryin' to figure out the young. When yuh find the hoss-guard down the slope, Hennin', yo'll find Art Swindell just off to his left. . . ."

He laughed. "I mighta knowed Runt wouldn't fall for a jaybird like him—not with so much good cowboy stock around. Say, Liz!" His voice boomed. "Can't yuh find somethin' to cook up an' eat around here? We ain't in no hurry now!"

THE END

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Gun-Guards for the Purgatory Express •

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A "Sargent Brothers" novel

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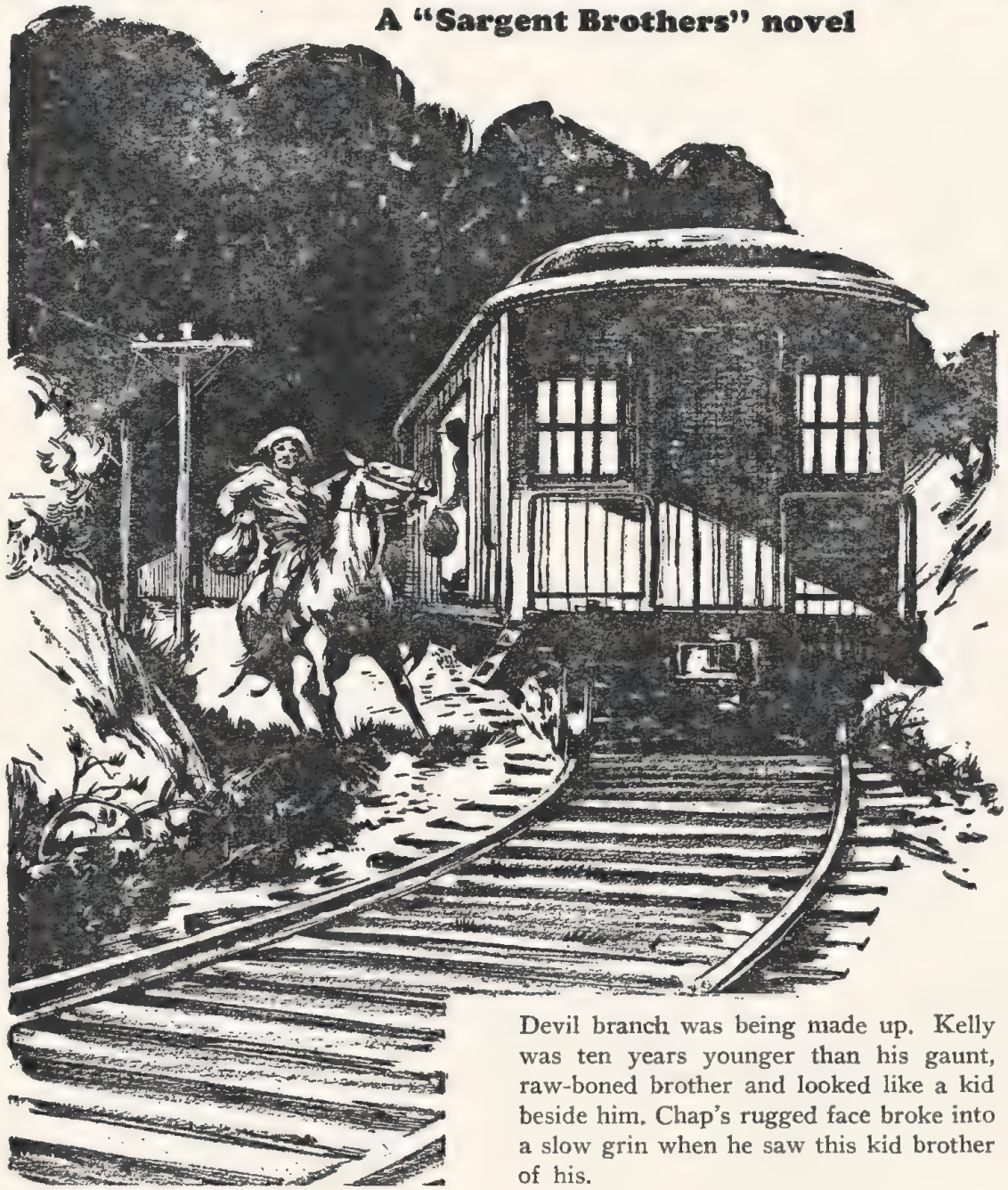

CHAPTER ONE

Greased Rails for the Treasure Limited

KELLY SARGENT rode into Comanche Junction and found his brother Chap down in the railroad yards where a train for the Dirty Devil branch was being made up. Kelly was ten years younger than his gaunt, raw-boned brother and looked like a kid beside him. Chap's rugged face broke into a slow grin when he saw this kid brother of his.

"Where you been holin' out the past six months, Kelly?" he asked.

Kelly looked pointedly at Chap's road marshall badge, "Chap," he asked "is it a fact that the railroad's sendin' a gold shipment to the Dirty Devil Bank tonight?"

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Jolted, Chap retorted, "Who told you that, kid?"

"Are you?" Kelly persisted.

"I can't tell even *you* that. I'm workin' for the railroad now, Kelly."

"Chap, lay off this run! Let somebody else go with that train."

"Kid, while I'm wearin' this badge I go where I'm sent. When I can't do that, I'll turn it in."

But Kelly actually broke down and begged. "Chap, don't do it! Because I know that gold shipment will never reach Dirty Devil!"

"Kelly, I reckon you'd better break down some more and do some explainin'."

"All I can tell you is this: There's a *banker* over at Dirty Devil named Sharpless that ain't a banker at all. He's a land shark who's got a twist on some of the ranchers over there. They don't intend to take their trimmin' layin' down."

"What do you mean by 'got a twist', Kelly?"

"He opened up his bank and made them ranchers believe he was their friend. He lent money on what they thought was long terms. Now he's closin' them out as fast as their loans come due, discountin' their paper in big Eastern banks. Some of them claim he's even falsified papers—"

But Chap broke in. "Kelly, if that's the kind of a hombre they're up against, you tell them ranchers to take it out on *him* not on the railroad. You know that the railroad is responsible for every dollar it carries until it is delivered. In this case, the ranchers won't *hurt* the man that has swindled them, and they *will* hurt the railroad that opened up that country for them."

Kelly made one last try, "Chap, I'm *beggin'* you to lay off this run!"

Chap looked this kid brother straight in the eye. "Kelly, even if you was to tell me that *you* was in on this business, it wouldn't change me an inch."

Without another word Kelly turned and walked away. It nearly tore the heart out of Chap to watch him, because he had practically raised the kid and Kelly had been a handful all the way.

Not that Kelly was bad—he wasn't, but he was forever letting his sympathies get the better of his reason. He was always fighting for some wild cause, or for somebody that didn't deserve help of any kind.

He would have called Kelly back and talked to him further, but he knew this was one time Kelly wouldn't listen. The kid believed he was in the right just as firmly as Chap knew he was in the wrong.

He wondered how in the world Kelly had got wind of the gold shipment because every precaution had been taken to keep it secret. Buckmaster superintendent of the Morelock Division had advised taking a strong guard, a fast engine and a light train and smashing the shipment through the wild country between the Junction and Dirty Devil.

But he had left it all up to Chap, and Chap had decided that secrecy was the best method, because the fastest and best guarded train could be wrecked. So he had arranged for Wild Bill O'Clory to pull the regular night freight, with the gold shipment in an old express car sandwiched between the freight cars. Only an express man and a special bank guard would ride in the car.

★ ★ ★

IT WAS nearly dark when this train crept out of the yards and shunted over to the branch line. Chap walked along it's length until he came to the express car, about the middle. He rapped on the locked door.

From inside came the express man's call: "What is it?"

"Keep the car doors locked, whatever happens," he called back. He continued on towards the head end, where the pulsing locomotive's headlight channeled the rain thickened gloom.

Wild Bill O'Clory looked down from his high seat on the right.

"Climb aboard, Road Marshal, and I'll be takin' her bridle off."

Chap swung up into the cab and settled himself on the fireman's seat, where he always rode when traveling with a train. Wild Bill sprayed steam from his cylinder cocks and opened the throttle. His pet engine picked up the train and stuck her black nose against the blacker barrier of the night.

Chap knew that the proper move for him would have been to delay the shipment. But he reasoned that since they had found out about this one, they would find out about a postponement, and he still had confidence in Kelly. Kelly would try to talk them out of it, or tell them the shipment wasn't coming through tonight.

He drove the disquiet from his mind and turned to watch Wild Bill. It was always a revelation to watch Wild Bill tool this locomotive. Bill was a wizard at the throttle. But tonight he'd need all his skill.

It was the kind of night that constituted a perfect nightmare for railroaders. The first warm rain of spring was falling in the mountains and as the warm water penetrated the chilled earth an earth-born fog arose to make thicker the blackness. The fog grew as they drove into the mountains, and the beam from the headlight was whipped before it penetrated the length of the engine.

Unmindful of soft track and dense fog, Bill was driving her on up the windings of the Dirty Devil valley through Black Canyon until they hit the long and heavy Dirty Devil grade. There Chap felt the nose of the big engine lift, heard her snore deepen. Still she walked the rails as steady as a fine watch, responsive to every mood and whim of her driver.

They were almost to the top of this divide and within half a dozen miles of the new town of Dirty Devil when the break came. That sweetly pulling engine, her exhaust hitting as sharp and clean as a knife point, her drivers sticking to the rails like lodestone, suddenly flew up. Completely and without warning, she lost her footing.

Bill had the throttle open almost to the limit of the quadrant and was sitting there, proud as a peacock at the way his darling was walking the rails, and he was caught completely by surprise. She shivered from end to end like a giddy dancer. Her stack was rent with a solid roar while her drivers spun so violently that Chap felt the awful pound of the counterweights.

Bill sledged home the throttle and the engine ceased her wild dance. The train limped on, slowing. Wild Bill had a pained, incredulous look on his face as he opened his sand lever and again fed her steam, gently. She took hold dutifully and Wild Bill grinned across the cab at Chap, his teeth making a white splash in his grease-blackened face.

"Faith, and the darling is ashamed of herself," he shouted. "She niver kicked up her heels like that befur."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before she flew up again and went into an even wilder dance. Chap thought she would kick her siderods off before Bill could quiet her. The train, already having lost headway, stopped dead, and Bill was obliged to shoot on his brakes to keep it from rolling back down the grade. Then he just sat there, an unbelieving expression on his face.

"'Tis slick, yes," he muttered. "But I've pulled twice this grade wid th' rails slick as a steer's gut wid glare ice. Mar-

shal, we'll have to cut the train!"

Chap shook his head. "Not yet, Bill," he said, and climbed down out of the cab. He worked forward under the black, hissing boiler, up ahead of the engine where the headlight battled the fog and night.

Stooping, he ran his finger over a rail. It was as slick as glass. Chap walked back and climbed into the cab. He kicked open the firebox door and held his hand in the glare.

"Look, Bill!" he exclaimed.

Wild Bill gave one look. "'Tis grease! Some schoundrel has greased th' rails!" He turned to the fireman, "Take a bunch of waste and clean th' rails whilst I back up fer a run at ut," he ordered.

The fireman seized a great wad of waste from a seat locker and loped off the engine as Wild Bill put the locomotive in reverse and started backing slowly down the grade.

Chap, his nerves already on edge suffered a bad moment. It occurred to him that this might be Kelly's handiwork. The kid was smart, and Chap knew if any hold-up of the train was attempted with Kelly's knowledge, the kid would work it somehow so Chap couldn't interfere. He wondered if Kelly had expected *him* to unload and clean the rails of the grease while the train was backed up for a fresh try.

Bill stopped the train a few hundred yards down the grade for a fresh try. Chap fully expected them to be jumped then, but they weren't. Bill gave the engine steam and she smashed into the couplings. She walked up the grade from a dead stop with such eagerness that Bill shook his head sadly.

"Faith, and she' eatin' up this grade like she had naught but a crummy on her tail!" he exclaimed.

They were almost back to the greased section when even Chap realized that the engine was making the grade entirely too easily to be pulling a long string of freight cars. The realization of what had happened hit him with the impact of a hard blow.

"Hold her, Bill, till I see if we're all here!" he yelled, and snatching up a lantern he went over the coal in the tender like a goat. Chap went back over a box car, another, and another and suddenly his reaching foot pawed at thin air. He dropped down to the beam with a sinking feeling about his middle. The coupling was open!

* * *

HE CLUNG to the grab-iron with one hand, and leaning far out and with the lantern, gave Bill a frantic back-up sign. Bill responded with such violence that Chap was slammed against the car end and near lost his footing. He did lose the lantern.

Then far down the grade came the report of a shot, another and another. Even Wild Bill must have heard them, for the car on which Chap clung surged back with a leap, and the snort of the engine shattered the night.

They screamed around a curve and Chap saw the section of the train they had lost. Rather, he saw the light from an open car doof, and since the express car was the only one in the string that carried a light, he knew the worst had happened.

As they came nearer, he saw a rider on a horse close up before the open door of the express car, and somebody inside the car was passing out the canvas sacks which held the gold shipment.

The distance was too great and the light too poor to recognize anybody, but he could see that this man was not masked.

He jerked his six-shooter and sent a bullet winging over the rider's head. He shot high purposely, because he was afraid that it might be Kelly.

Immediately the rider whirled his horse about and in one jump was out of the shaft of light from the open car door and swallowed by the darkness.

He was on ground and running before Bill had stopped the engine. He vaulted into the express car. Calloway, the express man, was dead with a bullet through his head. Gormley, the bank guard was stretched senseless, perhaps dead, on the floor and the pile of canvas sacks containing the gold was gone.

The brakeman and conductor came rushing up from the rear.

"How many were there?" Chap asked, a deathly sickness gripping him.

"Never seen but two," ejaculated the conductor. "One rode herd on us and kept the caboose sprayed with bullets. Reckon there had to be at least two more up here."

Chap didn't waste time looking at the express man. He was dead. But Gormley seemed to have been only slugged. Chap pulled him to a sitting position and shook him. He was a thick, square-headed Dutchman and he mumbled something. Chap shook him again.

"Why did you open that door, Gormley? I told you not to do that under any circumstances."

Gormley shook his head violently and opened his eyes. Groaned and held his head in his hands. *"Himmel,* my headt!"

Chap said roughly, "Who unlocked that door?"

"Calloway. We thought id vas you—day shot Calloway undt slugged me. . . ." Then he collapsed against the side of the car, holding his head in his hands and groaning again.

Chap stood up and spoke to Wild Bill, who had come back from the engine. "Get us into Dirty Devil, Bill. There's nothin' we can do here. I'll ride here the rest of the trip."

After the train got into motion he closed the door and questioned Gormley closely. Gormley stuck to his original story that Calloway had opened the car, thinking it was Chap, and had been shot on sight. He said one man had come into the car and knocked him down with a gun. And that was all he knew, excepting that the men were masked.

Chap didn't dispute his story, but he knew the man lied, because the man he'd seen was not masked. He believed it was Gormley, himself, that had passed out the gold, because nobody had jumped out of the car after he came in sight. It looked to him as if Gormley was in league with the men who had robbed the car, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

The loss of the gold itself didn't bother him half as much as the killing of the express man. He knew that Buckmaster would never rest until the persons responsible for that murder had paid for it. Buckmaster was that kind of a railroader —hurt one of his men and you hurt him.

He dropped off at the Dirty Devil station and had the night man telegraph his report to Buckmaster. Then, since he knew the bank was long since closed, he decided to get a bite to eat and hunt a bunk.

For once, he dreaded the coming of the morrow. It was a mighty tough thing to vision hunting down a hold-up gang of which a man's kid brother might be a member.

Outside the station he stood surveying the street which stretched before him. Saloons, easily recognizable, and some other late joints were still open. Down the track a little way was a lighted lunch wagon, sitting close to the right-of-way.

Chap was about to move that way when two riders rode past the station. One continued on down the street, the other turned his horse and dismounted before the lunch wagon.

Even from where he stood Chap could see clearly into the wagon's unshuttered

windows. There was a girl in there in a white dress, and he saw the man who has dismounted go inside, straddle a stool, and flip his hat free of accumulated water. Then he saw the man make a grab at the girl's arm. She drew back away from him quickly.

Chap moved for the car with long strides. When he thrust open the door the girl was backed against the wall, looking white and scared. The man whirled about and Chap had a look at a black-browed face, hard black eyes, and a thin mouth. He was a tall, high-shouldered man about his own age, or a little older. His heavy wool jacket was soaked as if he had been out in the rain a long time.

For a minute he thought the fellow would jump him, but Chap saw him center his look on his badge.

"You a railroader?" he asked harshly.

Chap hadn't liked the man at sight, and now his temper was short. "Is that a crime?" he asked.

The man pushed back his open coat and put both hands on his hips so that his cartridge-studded gun-belt showed. "It *could* be around here," he replied.

Chap disregarded him as he stalked forward and straddled a stool. "Gimme whatever you got handy for a hungry man, ma'am."

The black-browed man stood silent a moment, then said, "See you later, Patsy. Good-night."

The girl replied, "Good-night, Tom."

Chap piled into the food she put before him and pondered. When he had come in, he'd thought the girl was scared of the fellow, but she didn't sound that way when she told him good-night.

"Who was that man, ma'am?" he asked.

"Tom Aultmeyer. He's the land agent here."

"Maybe I'm mistaken, but I sort of got the idea he was crowdin' you when I came in. Was he?"

"Oh, no. Tom's one of my best friends.

Somehow Chap thought she wasn't telling the truth; that maybe she was afraid to tell the truth.

He said: "Look, ma'am, I'm road marshal for this division, and this lunch wagon is on railroad property. If you need any help any time, don't you be afraid to holler."

Then he put down a dollar and walked out before she could offer him any change. Crossing to a hotel, he turned in.

That girl over there made him think of the chances Kelly had passed up to get married and start a home of his own. Kelly never had known a real home, and since Chap had started working for the railroad, Kelly had just kicked around any old place. Right now, Chap knew that Kelly's chance of ever having a home of his own looked mighty slim.

CHAPTER TWO

The Fight at the Bank

WHEN CHAP entered the bank next morning several people were ahead of him. Dutch Gormley was there, and Aultmeyer, the agent. Both were talking to a pudgy, short-legged man with a sheriff's star pinned on his vest. They stopped talking as Chap entered.

Chap spoke to Gormley, "Where's Sharpless?"

Gormley jabbed his thumb towards the cage and Chap saw two men in there. One was a stooped man with a drooping musache wearing faded overalls; plainly a rancher. The other was a hawk-faced man with a high, curving nose and eyes as cold as a fish-hawk's. A man about fifty, he was lean, angular and bony with putty-colored hair.

Evidently the two had been having a hot discussion, for the rancher's voice

suddenly raised angrily: "Sharpless, when you made that loan, you told me I would have all the time I wanted. Now you tell me it's completely out of your hands, and I'll have to deal with an outside concern that can close me out in a minute—"

Sharpless' voice cut in, as cold sounding as the man himself, "I told you I'd been forced to discount some of the paper I hold. Too many of you ranchers have failed to pay up. I couldn't carry you all."

"Sharpless, you're a liar. You threw us to the wolves, that's what you've done! You ain't foolin' nobody! You shipped fifty thousand in here in gold last night, gold you got on our paper from outside banks. What are you goin' to do with that gold? Why, you'll rope in some more poor devils like me and my neighbors, and throw them to the wolves, too. You're nothin' but a bloodsuckin' thievin' scoundrel! You ought to be tarred and feathered and—"

Sharpless, his face a mask of fury jerked about. "Gormley! Aultmeyer! Throw this man out of here!"

The gaunt rancher suddenly whipped out a gun and kicked the cage door open. He stepped out, his eyes blazing and held the gun covering Gormley, Aultmeyer and the pudgy sheriff.

The sheriff said nervously, "Now, now, Younger! Put that gun up and get out peacably. You got to submit to the law, you know."

Younger, the rancher, snarled, "What law, Avery? The law of this Territory, or the law of Banker Sharpless?"

Aultmeyer said sharply, "Sheriff, he's defying the law. He's pulled a gun on you!"

Thus prodded, Sheriff Avery pushed towards the rancher. Chap saw the game was to force the rancher to resist openly or submit to arrest.

He said, "Stay where you are, Sheriff! Younger, I expect you'd better shove along outside. I'll see you in a minute."

Sharpless charged through the cage. "Who are you to interfere in this?" he demanded. "Sheriff, arrest this man too!"

Chap's smile was frosty and he stood with his big hands hanging free, a big dangerous man, as even Sheriff Avery could see.

Gormley said quickly, "That's the railroad marshal, Zin."

Younger the rancher, thrust his gun into the holster and turned towards the door. Sharpless eyed Chap with an unforgiving gaze.

"Do you intend to do anything about recovering the money that was stolen last night, or has the railroad got so much it don't bother to look for forty or fifty thousand?"

"Just where do you suggest I start lookin', Sharpless?"

Sharpless stared at him a moment then turned towards the pudgy sheriff, "Avery, get a posse together. Go out to the scene of the hold-up and see if you can pick up any sign."

Chap said sharply, "Hold on, Sheriff. I think we can find more sign right here in this bank than we can out there in the mountains. Gormley, I want you to answer a few questions. First I want you to tell us who handed them sacks of gold out to them hold-up men."

Gormley's eyes licked wickedly at Chap, then he growled, "One of them climbed into the car, like I told you."

"What became of him? I was in sight of that car before the job was done. I saw *somebody* passin' out sacks to a man on horseback, but I didn't see anybody jump out of that car."

Gormley looked like a cornered rat. "I was knocked out; I don't know anything about what happened."

"You was knocked out," Chap continued, "with a gun-barrel. Well, Gormley, I never seen a man hit hard enough

with a gun-barrel to be knocked out unless it left a mark. Usually it splits a man's scalp. Show us where you were hit, Gormley."

Aultmeyer cut in sharply. "What are you tryin' to do, Marshal? Make out a case against the bank?"

Chap retorted, "I'm tryin' to find out who unlocked the door of that car and pitched out the gold. I know good and well it wasn't Calloway, 'cause—"

The bank door was suddenly thrown open and two men came in. One was Kelly, the other was a young man about Kelly's age that Chap didn't know. This young man carried something wrapped in his slicker which was obviously heavy.

* * *

KELLY GRINNED when he saw Chap, then the other fellow plumped the slickerwrapped object down on the money shelf. "Sharpless," he said, "I want to make a deal with you."

Sharpless retorted, "I don't want anything to do with any of your deals, Bob Younger. Get out of my bank and stay out. Your dad was in here, and there won't be no more time on his loan."

Bob Younger said pleasantly, "I didn't come to ask for more time, Sharpless, I come to pay off the loan."

He unwrapped the slicker and revealed a canvas bag with a drawstring mouth. He loosened the draw string and dumped a heap of gold coins on the shelf.

"Count it, Sharpless. I think you'll find enough, and some to spare."

Sharpless snatched the canvas sack and held it up so everybody could see it. "Arrest this man!" he shouted. "This is the stolen mon—"

A gun barked wickedly. Chap saw Bob Younger grab at his stomach with both hands, and anguish twisted his face. Then another gun roared, and Aultmeyer, who had fired the first shot, let out a yell. Kelly had shot his gun and a finger from his hand with one bullet.

Gormley reached for a gun, and Chap hit him alongside the head with such force that he knocked the fellow completely over a low railing. Then Kelly was holding Bob Younger up with one hand and menacing them with his smoking gun.

As he backed to the door with the hard-hit Younger on his shoulder, Kelly's gun spoke twice again. Chap heard the pudgy sheriff squeal and saw him streak for the security of the railing. He saw Sharpless jerk as an invisible hornet grazed his nose. Then when Kelly's gun jumped towards Aultmeyer, that individual threw both hands high and yelled, "Don't shoot!"

Altogether it was the most deadly piece of shooting he had ever seen Kelly pull off. He knew the kid wasn't shooting to kill anybody; but he certainly put the fear of God into that crowd.

As the bank door slammed, and there was the hard rush of spurred horses. Chap broke for the door and stood in it, barring it against anybody else. He saw the two horses tear out of town, Kelly holding Bob Younger in the saddle. To make a show, he jerked out his six-shooter and emptied it over their heads. Kelly twisted about, flung up his free hand in a parting salute.

Sheriff Avery crawled out from his hole, his face pasty. "H-have they g-g-gone?" he chattered.

Gormley came rolling out from behind the wrecked railing. He shook a hard fist at Chap.

"He helped dem!" he ranted. "He k-knocked me down ven I tried to shoot!"

Sharpless raged, "By heaven, I've seen enough! First you come in here and try to pin this on one of my own men. Then

you help the real robbers get away!"

He racked out of the bank, his thin legs flailing the air towards the telegraph office.

★ ★ ★

CHAP SAW the elder Younger across the street, preparing to mount his horse. He crossed over to him.

Younger surveyed him with a puzzled eye. He said dryly, "You're a poor shot for a marshal, mister. Or mebby you *wanted* that pair to get away."

"You know them?"

"One of them happens to be my boy, and the other is a kid that's been hangin' out at my ranch the past six months."

Chap said dryly, "If you got any idea where they'll hit for, I expect you'd better get there, cause one of them was hard hit. Likely there'll be a posse on their tail in a mighty short time."

"Mister," said the rancher, "I don't get you. You're supposed to be workin' for the railroad, yet you've just helped a couple of boys that are supposed to have robbed one of your trains!"

"This railroad," Chap explained, "is more interested in helpin' ranchers develop this country than it is in helpin' land sharks steal it. If you find out where that pair went, I wish you would let me know."

"I'll do that, neighbor," said Younger, and rode away.

Chap was turning back across the street when Sharpless came back from the express office.

"You're wanted on the wire." There was a triumphant gleam in Sharpless' eyes.

Chap turned slowly towards the office. There the agent showed him the wire that Sharpless had sent to Buckmaster, the superintendent, over at Comanche Junction.

"Buckmaster's on the wire now," explained the agent. "He wants to know if that wire Sharpless sent is straight."

Chap said grimly, "Tell him yes."

The agent sent the message. In a few minutes, he picked up a pencil and wrote down the reply that crackled back, then shoved the paper towards Chap. It read:

Tell Sargent to turn in his badge.
Buckmaster.

Without a word Chap unpinned his badge and dropped it on the desk. When he turned about, Sharpless stood staring through the window, a triumphant look on his face.

Chap made a reaching stride for the door, but when he came outside Sharpless was halfway to the bank and traveling fast.

Chap stood there in a brown study

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while a freight passed through and roared on towards Comanche Junction. Soon after that a posse, headed by the fat sheriff, with Aultmeyer riding beside him and Gormley farther back, poured out of town in the direction Kelly and Bob Younger had taken.

Chap knew that, hard hit as Younger was, the two would have to find a hide-out mighty quick.

CHAPTER THREE

Last Chance Hideout

CHAP MADE for the livery barn in a lope. In less than three minutes he was tearing after the posse on a hammer-headed bay that was ugly enough to be tough. He did not try to overtake the lawmen, but kept in occasional sight of them. With Bob Younger wounded, the two couldn't possibly stay long in front of a well-mounted bunch, and the soft ground would make easy tracking.

The chase followed the railroad for several miles. From the top of a grade he saw the posse ahead, now dismounted and clustered about a siding. So intent were they that he escaped notice, so he dropped back, hit his horse in the dense growth of pines along the right-of-way, and worked forward through it.

He was able, in that cover, to work up within a few yards of the posse at the siding. They had lost the scent and couldn't pick it up again, but they had found the horses Kelly and Bob Younger had ridden out of town.

Aultmeyer seemed to do the most talking. "Boys, my guess is they flagged that freight and are headed right now for Comanche Junction. We might beat around here all day, searching for their sign and never find it. Common sense tells you that they'd never leave their horses unless they'd found a faster way. to travel. We know Bob Younger was hit hard. I think our best bet is to beat it back to town and notify the Junction to meet that train and search it when it pulls in. What do you think, Sheriff?"

Sheriff Avery replied importantly, "I think you're dead right, Tom. Come on, boys."

The dozen men mounted and went tearing back towards town.

Chap moved out of the brush and examined the ground about the siding, but found nothing but the posse's footprints.

The siding itself was a long one and disappeared in the brush ahead. He started following it and a few hundred feet farther on discerned a drop of blood on a tie. He knew then that Kelly and Younger had not flagged the freight. And he discovered something else—the siding was not a siding at all, but a spur that ran back in the mountains. Apparently it had not been used for years, with the exception of that part near the branch line needed as a siding.

He followed the old spur on back into the mountains finding no other sign of Kelly and Younger. But he knew they could easily hide their sign by walking the rails or ties.

About two miles from the branch he came suddenly upon an old mine with a dilapidated tipple careening against the sky. From the tipple a small track for mine cars ran down a steep incline to the point where the black mouth of the shaft plunged into the bowels of the mountain.

Chap stopped there. He knew without the shadow of a doubt that Kelly and Younger were in that shaft. And he knew something else.

Younger must be hard hit indeed to force them to this desperate attempt to find a hideout. He remembered now that this was the old Last Chance mine, which had been operated before the building

of the railroad, and which had failed soon after the spur had been built.

Chap was standing there when he saw Kelly's drawn face appear at the mouth of the shaft. Kelly motioned, and Chap climbed down the incline.

Kelly said, "I didn't figure this dodge would fool you long, Chap."

"Kelly, I've known you to do some fool things, but I never thought you would try to pay off a loan at a bank with money that was stolen from it the night before—in the same canvas bag!"

"I told Bob not to trust that girl," Kelly replied bitterly.

"Kelly, did you and Bob Younger hold up my train last night?"

"Chap, the first inklin' we had of a hold-up was when that Sharpless grabbed that sack and began yellin', and they begin shootin'. That's the livin' truth, if I ever told it."

"You was figurin' on it, weren't you?"

"In a way, Chap. But after I talked to you and you told me it would be the railroad's loss, I told Bob the deal was off."

"Then where did you get that money?" Chap's eyes were flinty.

"From that girl, Chap—that lunch wagon girl. You see, she and Bob are pretty thick. We stopped there this mornin' when we rode into town, and she brought out that bag of gold and gave it to Bob. She told him to take it and pay off his father's loan at the bank with it."

"Where did she say she got it?"

"That's just it! She didn't say, and Bob didn't ask her. I told him it was a frame, but he said she wouldn't do that to him. Just took it right over to the bank and planked it down. And you know what happened then."

"Was he hit bad?"

"Bad! Chap, he's goin' to die. If I'd known how bad he was hurt at the time I'd of blowed that Aultmeyer's head off instead of his finger. What right did he have to pull a gun on Bob?"

"Let's have a look at him, kid."

★ ★ ★

KELLY LED him back into the shaft a short distance where Bob Younger lay on the cold damp earth of the shaft floor. His face was puffed and and his eyes glazed a little.

He began to mutter: "Tell you she wouldn't frame me, Kelly! She ain't that kind of a girl. You wouldn't frame me, would you, Patsy? Somebody fooled. . . . Patsy, where did you get. . .?"

His voice trailed off, then came stronger again. "Go on, Kelly! I'm done for, I tell you! Get away. . . ."

Kelly said miserably: "He's been like that all the time."

Chap pulled Kelly to the mouth of the shaft. "I think I know how this whole business was worked, Kelly, but we ain't got time to go into that now. We got to get that boy to a place where he can be taken care of, and do it quick."

"Where?" said Kelly bitterly, "and how? The reason I took out for this old mine was because a little more ridin' would kill him."

"You stay here and do what you can for him and leave the rest to me," Chap counseled. "Don't get down-hearted, kid. We've come through just as tough spots."

Kelly swallowed and nodded.

There wasn't any doctor closer than the railroad hospital car at Comanche Junction that would fill the bill. And Chap knew that getting him there in time was going to be about the biggest order he ever bit off.

He legged it back to his horse, mounted and headed for town at a long lope, his mind busy on the problem confronting him. In town he returned the horse to the stable and hurried over to the station. It was almost sundown then.

At the station he found Sharpless, Aultmeyer and the pudgy sheriff closeted with the agent, listening to a wire coming in at the moment.

"No," the agent was telling the three, "they were not on the freight. The crew swears they did not make a single stop between here and Comanche Junction."

Sharpless snarled, "All you railroaders stick together!"

"Them two was not railroaders!" retorted the agent hotly.

"Just the same, isn't it? One of them is a brother to that marshal."

The agent said hotly, "Well, I give you the wire as it come to me. If you don't believe what it says, why don't you ride over to the Junction and see for yourself? It's only fifty miles."

The pudgy sheriff said quickly, "We're not doubtin' your word, Jim. We know you're doin' the best you can to help us nail them fellers. Mistake we made was in leavin' the trail."

"The mistake we made," replied Aultmeyer loudly, "was in not arrestin' that big phony road marshal. If it hadn't been for him, that pair would never have got away."

"Well I just want to drop a word of warnin'," the agent said. "When you do try to arrest him, you'd better get more help than you got here. I happen to know that hombre is plumb poison."

"The more reason why he should be put under lock and key," replied Aultmeyer. "Come on, Sheriff, we're wasting time."

Chap was inclined to step out and invite them to start arresting. After the shooting of Bob Younger he could have killed Aultmeyer with a clear conscience. But he had too much at stake to run needless risks, so he flattened himself in the corner beside the bay window and the three passed within a few feet of him.

After they had gone Chap stepped into the station.

The agent jerked about. "Man, get out of here! Don't you know they're after you?" the agent said.

Chap nodded. "What time does Wild Bill come through here on his return run to the Junction?"

"In about an hour."

"Does he stop?"

"Always eats supper at Patsy's lunch-car."

Chap said, "Much obliged," and stepped out of the station.

It was almost dark then and the form of a man stirred in deep shadow of the station. Chap's gun was in his hand and the click of the hammer sounded sharply.

The man spoke quickly: "It's me—Younger, Marshal."

★ ★ ★

CHAP TOOK the rancher by the arm and led him around to the back of the freight room. Younger said, "I didn't find hair nor hide of them, Marshal."

Chap said, "You can leave that off now, Younger. I'm just a ordinary citizen. And I reckon you might as well know now that the kid with your boy was my brother." He went on to tell Younger about finding Kelly and Younger's son. "Kelly," he concluded, "thinks that girl framed them. What do you think?"

Younger said, "I don't know—she could. But I always thought she was a straight girl. Her father was an engineer on the railroad, killed a couple of years back in a wreck. This Aultmeyer is a sort of a lawyer as well as a land agent. He has been eggin' her on to sue the railroad for damages—"

Chap said tersely, "Bring that girl around here where I can talk to her."

Younger faded into the darkness. Chap waited with a growing tension. The tangle of this whole business was begin-

ning to unravel. . . . A boot sole scuffed the cinders, a splotch of white showed against the dark.

Younger's voice said, "Here she is."

Chap reached out and caught the girl's arm, pulling her into the blackness of the freight room. He could feel her trembling under his grip, and hear her breathing.

"Ma'am, I want to ask you a straight question, and I want a straight answer: Did you frame Bob Younger?"

He felt her sag, heard her horrified gasp. Then she bucked up. "Frame Bob! You wouldn't say that if I was a *man!*"

"Well, he thinks you did. Ma'am, where did you get that money you give him?"

Her words came in a hot torrent: "From Tom Aultmeyer. He gave it to me just before you came into the lunch wagon last night. I didn't know anything about a hold-up then; I didn't know anything about it when I gave Bob the money today. But I knew his father was about to lose his ranch. I want to help—"

Chap cut in: "Why would Aultmeyer give *you* all that money?"

"He said it was what he had collected from the railroad for my father's death. He was killed on the railroad. I know it sounds unbelievable, but it's the truth!"

Far to the west a locomotive's long whistle roamed through the night. It was Wild Bill's hand on the whistle cord, and Chap had to do some fast thinking.

He knew that Bob Younger's life hung on a thread. And he knew that if anything would buck him up to make a fight for it, it would be the knowledge that this girl did not frame him, that she had been used as a tool by the crafty Aultmeyer.

He spoke fast, "Listen, ma'am, Bob Younger needs to have you tell him the truth. He's out here at the old Last Chance mine, in bad shape. I'm goin' to try to get him over to Comanche Junction on that train you hear comin'. Would you like to go with us?"

She said, all broken up, "I'd give my life to help him!"

"Then you be ready to board that engine when it comes in here."

Wild Bill's whistle was already yelling for the board, and his searchlight spraying the station. Chap pulled the girl out of the station and Younger came quickly towards them.

"Aultmeyer, Sharpless and Gormley are on the platform with the sheriff," Younger warned. "They've got the sheriff pumped up to make a try at arrestin' you. I don't know why, but they figure you'll show up here at the station."

Chap considered. He couldn't risk a fight now, but he had to get to Bill's engine with this girl.

"Younger, when the engine passes the station, you slip down to the caboose, and let off a few shots. That may pull them that way."

The engine was passing the station then, shaking the earth with her tread. Younger shouted assent above the roar of the train as he left running. The engine's headlight passed on and left them in total darkness again. Chap found the girl holding his arm with a trembling sort of death grip.

Down towards the end of the freight he heard a shot, a yell, then a six-shooter was unloaded as fast as the trigger could be pulled.

On the opposite side of the station there was an exclamation, then feet pounded towards the rear of the train. Chap did not have to encourage the girl; she started fast with him, and made him leg it for all he was worth to keep pace with her.

They rambled around the station and turned up the track where Bill had stopped his engine on the main line.

Wild Bill was just climbing down out of his cab when they reached the engine.

Chap lifted the girl up and thrust her at the astonished engineer.

"Put this girl aboard and get back to your throttle, Bill!"

Wild Bill exclaimed, "Begorra, and I'll do just that, Marshal! Patsy, gurl, ye'll git that nice dress all dirty."

Chap crowded up after them. Bill lifted the girl to a seat on his side of the cab and then he turned towards Chap.

"What's up, Marshal?"

"Bill, I wouldn't fool you if I could. I'm not wearin' a badge now, and I got no right to order you to do anything. But a boy that this girl thinks a lot of is lyin' wounded out at the old Last Chance mine. We got to get him over to the Junction quick if he's goin' to live. He's accused of holdin' up our train last night, but I give you my word he had nothin' to do with it."

"Your wurrd is good as gold wid me, Marshal. Shud I call in th' skipper?" Bill meant the conductor.

"If you do we'll be caught. There's a bunch layin' for me, Bill."

Bill turned to the astonished fireman. "Get some steam in her," he ordered, and cracked the throttle.

The engine's draft gear smashed and she took the train out of there. Looking back as the caboose shot past the light of the station, Chap saw a man running desperately to catch the train. He did get one hand on the caboose rail then he was thrown end over end.

"Bill, the conductor missed his grab."

Bill grinned, "I've been tryin' to lose that divil the whole run!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Wild Bill Takes the Bridle Off

THE engine was quickly into full running stride. Patsy McCarran, clinging to the cab seat, bounced like a rubber ball with the lurch and swing of the engine. Chap stood with his mouth close to Wild Bill's ear.

"This boy," he explained, "is too bad hurt to be carried down from the mine. Do you suppose you could uncouple a car and run up on the spur?"

"This old gurl," said Bill pridefully, "will go whurever there's steel to carry her."

The distance out to the spur was short and Bill's headlight was soon picking out the switch target. Bill shut off and turned towards the fireman.

"Git back and jerk th' pin on th' first car. We're goin' fer a trip on th' spur."

The fireman exclaimed, "Bill, we got a meet at Morelock sidin'. Don't forget that."

"Do as ye're told, ye spalpeen, and set the switch fer me."

The fireman climbed back over the tender, jerked the pin when Bill stopped, then galloped forward and threw the switch under the glare of the headlight.

Bill pulled out on the spur, and after a few hundred feet was literally forcing a way through the brush that had overgrown the old spur. Speed here was impossible; in fact the track was so old and rotten that it was a miracle that the big engine stayed on it.

Bill had not waited for his fireman to reboard the engine, so Chap took off his jacket and gunbelt and had his try at heaving coal into the inferno of the firebox. What he lacked in skill he made up in strength and energy.

Bill grunted, "Faith, and I'm thinkin' you missed yer callin', Marshal. Holy Mother, what a track! Shure, and 'tis goin' to make a close meet at Morelock sidin' fer us."

Chap missed the significance of that at the time, but he had good cause to remember Bill's prediction before the run was over.

Bill stopped the decimated train with the headlight playing on the old tipple.

"Be gettin' th' b'y out, Marshal, whilst I fix a spot fer him in the car. Patsy, gurl, ye had as well stay wid me."

Chap took a brakeman's lantern and climbed down the decline to the mouth of the shaft. Kelly's face, dead white, under the rays of the lantern, looked out of the hole.

Chap said, "We got to move, kid."

He thrust the lantern into Kelly's hand, walked back and gathered the unconscious youth up in his arms. With Kelly lighting the way, they climbed that incline out without a single mis-step.

Bill had broken open the boxcar which luckily carried a shipment of green cowhides. Of these Bill had made a comfortable bed. Patsy McCarran was already in the car. When Chap put Bob Younger down and she saw his face in the light of the lantern, she clutched at her heart and swayed. Kelly loped in after Bob, and Wild Bill ran the door to and fastened it.

Bill, of necessity, had to back down the spur, and since it was all down-grade, Chap had no firing to do.

Once under way he said, "Faith, and I might have known that woild brother of yours wus mixed in wid this, Marshal!"

Chap felt Bill deserved an explanation, because Bill was risking his job to help out.

"Bill, here's how I've got it doped out. This Sharpless and Aultmeyer are in cahoots with some outside syndicate, tryin' to grab all this Dirty Devil country. They're all crooks, Bill, and I know this hold-up was an inside job."

Then he went on to explain what had happened in detail. When he came to the part the girl had played, Bill exploded wrathfully.

"Faith, and don't you whisper wan wurrd against that gurl, Marshal. I've known her since she wus knee high to a duck, and I knowed her dad befur—God rest his soul! 'Twas she that was framed!"

Chap agreed. "Here is how it happened, Bill: Gormley was the inside man. He shot Calloway, the express man, and he passed the gold out to Aultmeyer while Sharpless or some other hired crook rode herd on the caboose. It was only about eight miles from where we were held up to town, and they had time to get in there.

"I saw Aultmeyer and another man whom I believe now was Sharpless, himself. Aultmeyer stopped, left the bag of gold with the girl and told her the lie.

"They figured that the girl would give the gold to Bob Younger to help pull his dad out of the hole, and it worked, except that they failed to grab Bob and Kelly. They would have done that if Kelly hadn't scared them green with his shootin', because I sure wasn't expecting anything like that to happen. Bill, I'll lay you any odds you can name that that gold is in Sharpless's bank this minute —every penny of it!"

"No doubt, no doubt, Marshal!" growled Bill. "Oh, th' murdherin', thievin' scoundrels! We'll bate thim yit, Marshal!"

* * *

AT the branch, Bill backed into the train he had left, and the fireman—who had been left behind—threw the switch and came loping towards the engine.

Chap had dropped back to set the pin in the coupling, and when he came back into the cab the brakeman and Bill were engaged in a furious argument.

The fireman had his watch in his hand and was pointing to the face, shouting: "You can't make the meet, Bill! It'll be murder to try. Besides, the sheriff—"

Bill set a horny hand in the middle of the fireman's face and hurled him across the cab.

"Git yur back under that shovel and gimme steam and we'll see if we don't

make the meet!" he howled, then jerked the throttle almost the full sweep of the quadrant.

The engine was gone like a streak and the fireman, shaking his head and working his lips fell to bailing coal like a madman.

Chap shouted at Wild Bill, "If there's danger of a collision, hadn't we better wait here, Bill?"

Bill shouted back without taking his eyes off the rails, "We got to make the meet! Else we might tie up the whole system fer hours er days!"

Chap had ridden with Bill on many a wild ride before, but never on one like this. For Bill was supposed to take the Morelock siding, half way to Comanche Junction, to let another train pass. If he didn't get his train on the siding there in time, the meet was likely to be a head-on collision.

Chap watched a wild man drive a wild engine, for Bill literally took the bridle off her—one of the wildest in Western railroad history.

Looking forward along the black length of the moaning boiler Chap could see the solid sheet of flame erupting from the bellowing attack. The draft at the roaring firebox became so terrific that once when the desperately laboring fireman fell to his knees before the open inferno, his cap was snatched from his head and went out the stack, but not in the form it entered.

Yet in spite of all he could do, the fireman could not hold steam. Bill pointed to the guage and cursed the staggering fireman with ferocious profanity. The fireman clung to an injector stem and screamed back:

"You're guttin' her! You're suckin' her flues out!"

Wild Bill howled at Chap: "Show that liver-heart how to handle a shovel, Marshal!"

Chap snatched the shovel from the limp fireman and bent to his work. At that wild speed, with the leap and thrust of the engine, a man needed the agility of a cat to stay on his feet, to say nothing of hitting an eighteen-inch hole with a scoop of coal.

Chap's first heave rained coal all over the cab, and Chap near had his brains dashed out against the bucking boiler head.

Wild Bill's teeth showed through his black mask and he yelled: "Try agin', Marshal!"

Chap soon got the swing of it. His strength and natural cat-footedness stood him in good stead and before a mile had fled past he was swinging with the wild rhythm of the engine in a manner that brought a bellow of approval from Wild Bill.

"Holy Mother, whut a fireman ye wud make!"

The steam gauge stopped dropping. It started up and with the added pressure the wild engine became wilder. She moved through the night like a projectile, her dancing siderods a shimmering blur under the ghostly gleam from the air vents in the grate. She had fire in her teeth and wings in her heels as she romped the rails.

The fireman, rested, took over. Wild Bill had his watch in his hand now, and his eyes were fixed on it as often as on the rails. The fireman took time out to steal another look at his watch and Chap saw his face go ghastly.

They stormed through a cut at the top of a grade. The reaching headlight swooped down on a long tangent of straight track. At the bottom it picked out the switch target at Morelock switch. Beyond the switch the rails rose again and dropped over another cut. Through that cut suddenly showed a shimmering radiance.

Like a wild man the fireman leaped at Wild Bill and tried to wrest the throttle

from him. Bill knocked him senseless with a single back sweep of his arm. He howled at Chap: "Git his key and be ready to jump whin I give th' wurrd, and fer th' love av God, stay wid that switch and close ut befur Number Sivin can come in afther me!"

Chap dug the switch key out of the fireman's pocket and swung down on the leaping engine steps. The wind almost tore his clothes off.

Then through the cut, a headlight blazed full in his face! A whistle, wild and screaming, all but tore his head off. To Chap it looked as if they were riding straight to destruction and never had the urge to jump hit him so powerfully.

Suddenly the wild shout of Bill's exhause ceased, and brakes screamed and smoked. The switch target rushed at him.

"Jump!" howled Wild Bill.

Chap got his feet under him and jumped. The earth rose up and smashed him a stunning blow. He tumbled over and over and came up within inches of the switch target. Ahead, Bill's caboose-lights winked red and green. As he put the key in the lock, came the shout of Bill's engine in reverse.

Chap threw the switch and stood gripping the lever, as Bill backed toward the open siding, waiting until Bill should clear, if he ever did.

Then the desperate race began.

★ ★ ★

BILL was tearing the flues out of his pet engine in an attempt to back clear. The engineer of Number Seven was sticking to his post, fighting his engine down.

His headlight blazed closer and closer as Bill's train rocked back over the switch, and when Bill's engine smashed over the points, Seven was so close that Chap could read her number under the headlight. When he threw the switch lever he didn't know whether she would come in after Bill or continue, until the hot wind of her passing almost blew him down.

She never stopped. Her exhaust came on again and her whistle came back, cussing them as only an engineer can cuss with a whistle cord.

Bill's whistle yelped for Chap to give him the switch again, and Chap threw it. The engine snaked the train out on the main track again; Chap threw the switch and caught the caboose without stopping Bill.

He snatched a riding light from the back of the caboose and signaled Bill to go on. Bill's whistle yelped and the caboose lurched as Bill's engine put her shoulder to the train.

Then Chap drew his first free breath in many a mile. He pulled open the caboose door—and stepped straight into the murderous swing of a brakestick!

CHAPTER FIVE

Fight to the Finish!

OUT of the tail of his eye Chap saw the blow coming in time to partly avoid it. The stick whistled down across his face, tearing his left ear half off. He dove forward into the man that had tried to knock his brains out, caught him in his arms and hugged him close. At that same instant, at least three guns spoke. He felt the sickening impact as the lead went home in the man he held before him, killing him instantly.

Through the drifting smoke clouds he saw Aultmeyer, Sharpless and Gormley with guns pointed at him. It was the brakeman that he held between himself and their guns and he took full advantage of the moment of inaction as they realized their bullets had meated the wrong target.

They must, he realized, have been in the caboose when Wild Bill had pulled unexpectedly out of Dirty Devil. Now he knew just as well as they knew that they had to get him, and here he was with three guns looking at him and his own hanging up there on the boiler head of Wild Bill's engine where he had put it when he relieved the fireman.

Chap knew that his only chance was to carry the fight to them, and before they could recover from their initial stupefication.

The brakeman's stick was lying at his feet. It was two feet long, tough, hard hickory. At close quarters, it was a most formidable weapon, as he could attest by experience.

The three were standing close-bunched because of the narrowness of the space between the caboose benches. Chap suddenly whipped one arm down, lifted the dead brakeman and shot him bodily into them.

Without looking to see the effect of the human missile he stooped, swept up the brake stick and followed the brakeman with a prodigous leap. He intended at once to stampede them and bring his weapon into effective range.

Aultmeyer swerved desperately to avoid being knocked down by the brakeman's body. He shouldered into Sharpless just as Sharpless shot a second time, and missed. Chap reached Gormley, and the Dutchman, his face twisted into a horrible grimace, shot point-blank at him.

Bullet and brakestick went home almost at the same instant. A mighty blow whirled Chap half about, but left him still able to stand. Gormley's head cracked like an eggshell under the fierce blow of the brakestick.

Chap whirled towards the remaining two and caught another bullet. He scarcely felt it, and was surprised to find himself on one knee, with smoke so thick in the caboose he could scarcely see the caboose lights on the walls. A lurch of the caboose lent impetus to his spring as he launched himself towards the point where he knew they must be. He collided with a man and slammed him against the end of the caboose, and then climbed him like a squirrel.

It was too close to use a two foot brakestick. He drove his fist into a face and the head smashed the wall of the car with a report almost as loud as a gun shot.

Turning a little he saw Aultmeyer's face floating above the layer of gunsmoke. Aultmeyer had his gun leveled at Chap, but the gun hand was jumping as though its owner were stricken with the palsy, and if terror ever were written on a human's face, Aultmeyer's wore it at that instant.

Chap, of course, could not see himself. If he could have seen the gaunt wolf that was himself, with one ear half torn off, bleeding profusely, his face black with powder and coal smoke, one arm hanging limp as a rag, yet with that grim, never-say-die look on his face as he turned towards Aultmeyer, he might have understood Aultmeyer's terror.

He didn't hurry. He didn't feel any pain. He didn't feel any fear. He had only to take two steps to reach Aultmeyer with the brakestick and he sort of wondered why the fool didn't shoot. The gun wasn't empty, he could see the noses of three bullets showing in the cylinder.

He saw that cylinder rock forward, then back, forward, then back again. Aultmeyer was trying to ear back the hammer with a thumb that had lost its strength.

Chap said, "Go on, shoot me in the belly, like you did Bob Younger!" and then he let Aultmeyer have it, just as Gormley had got it. It seemed that he merely dropped the stick on Aultmeyer's head and it astonished him to see Ault-

meyer roll up his eyes then fold from the knees.

★ ★ ★

IT WAS three days before Chap came to himself, and when he did he was in the old car that the railroad company used for a hospital in the Comanche Junction yards. The same car he had found Kelly in that time a bunch of horsethieves worked Kelly over.

Directly across from him lay Bob Younger. Bob looked mighty peaked, but his eyes were open and clear, looking directly at Chap. Chap decided he must be a pretty tough youngster to survive that bullet of Aultmeyer's and the wild ride on the tail of Wild Bill's engine.

He said, "Guess the railroad doc got to you in time all right!"

Somebody near the door cleared his throat noisily. Chap turned his head, after an effort. There stood Buckmaster, looking twice as big as usual, chewing away at a dead cigar a mile a minute.

"Frank," said Chap, "you can take your old badge and throw it away. When a man—"

Buckmaster jerked the cigar out of his mouth and slammed it on the floor. He came as near pleading as Chap had ever heard that tough railroader come.

"That wasn't for keeps, Chap! You didn't try to explain anything, and I figured that mebby you could work better as a private citizen on that particular job. I knew there was a bunch of land sharks in there and I thought they would be more likely to show their hand to you if they thought they had me fooled too."

Chap didn't feel like arguing with him. "Has that gold shipment been located?"

"Sure! Right in Sharpless' bank, as you told Wild Bill it would be. Everything worked out just like you figured it would. What we didn't know, Sharpless told us when we put the screws to him."

"Where's Kelly?"

Buckmaster turned and opened the car door. In came not only Kelly, but Patsy McCarran. Kelly grinned, sort of sheepish like.

"Kid, I shore wished I had your trigger finger workin' in that caboose."

Kelly swallowed. "Seems like you done pretty well, Chap, with just a brakestick."

Patsy McCarran pushed Kelly aside, knelt down beside Chap and kissed him before the whole bunch of them. It was a real kiss, too.

Across the car, Bob Younger protested, good humoredly:

"Here, here! There's more than one bunged up man in this car, Patsy!"

THE END

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CHAPTER ONE

No Cure for a Gun-Sick Range!

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"Drop it," Doc Higgenbothem said. "I'm countin' three!"

In crowded yellow letters the sign on the side of the wagon said:

Dr. Higgenbothem's

Original Double-Distilled

Fireside Remedy

On the other side of the wagon was a picture of the fireside, with red and blue flames lapping high and furiously around a bottle.

On the let-down tailboard of the wagon a kid in blackface was doing a hoe-down. His jigging feet slapped around with a sound that puzzled everyone in the crowd who wasn't up close.

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tention. Their nervous glances kept straying about the pitch from one to another of Silk Shannon's gunmen.

From his camp-stool perch in the wagon, Doc Higgenbothem was also eyeing the gunmen. Attuned to the trouble building up here, he got up suddenly and moved forward to the wide tailboard.

"Break it off, Jim Crow," he muttered to the lad. "This ain't hookin' 'em. We'll try soft soap instead."

"Yassar, Doctor, suh," the boy answered in a high-pitched voice. He dug out a box from within the wagon, jumped down and started moving among the crowd.

The pitchman looked down from the tailboard. He lifted both hands and moved them toward him as though he were gathering in chips across a poker table. "Come on in closer, folks," he invited. His voice was a bull-throated bellow. It could only have been made that hoarse, it seemed, by a thousand years of ballyhooing.

The pitchman was quite a show all by himself. He had a red mustache which drooped at the ends. His eyes looked out fiercely from beneath bushy red brows. He was long and lank, with a soiled white shirtfront and a black coat that hung to his knees.

He picked out the thin man with the bullet-scarred face as the one most likely to start trouble, and tried to make friends with him. "Ah, my friend," he boomed, "I perceive you are, like myself, a man of smoking discrimination. I prefer a stogy to any other smoke. With your permission, sir. . . ." He reached into the air. Uncertain laughter swept the crowd as a stogy miraculously appeared in the pitchman's hand.

He reached again into thin air and produced a lighted match. He lit the stogy. He puffed hard, then went to work under the light of the coal-oil flare.

"Doctor Higgenbothem in person," he announced, "bringing to you the boon of the ages, that elixir of life which has startled medical science on two continents—gents, I refer to no other than the one and only, the supreme, the celebrated Dr. Higgenbothem's Original Double-Distilled Fireside Remedy. And for tonight only, gents, with each and every package, Doc Higgenbothem will give away absolutely free. . . ."

★ ★ ★

HE LEFT them hanging on the blissful thought of something for nothing, and swung into his soft soap talk. "But first a little fun, pleasure, and amusement for everybody. Watch closely, gents, because I warn you the hand is quicker than the eye." Again his hand stabbed out, and before their gaping eyes a shaving brush appeared in his grasp.

"It's wet and ready, gents. Watch some more." He raised his other hand high, palm outward. "Empty, as you can plainly see. But keep watchin'." Before their intent gaze he started working the shaving brush around in his empty palm. As though by magic, soap suds began to appear. They overflowed his hand, dripped down. He kept rubbing. The suds, thick and creamy, built up to haystack proportions in his hand.

Suddenly his voice boomed out, "The boy's got it, gents—the boy. Twenty-five cents for a full canful. It's shavin' magic. Twenty-five cents, and it lasts a lifetime. But you can't buy yet! No, not till I reveal where these here suds in my hand came from. I wouldn't fool you. No. My hand wasn't empty as it looked. There was a faint speck of the shavin' magic stickin' to my skin. But such a speck you couldn't see it. Now look at the suds I'm holdin' in my hand. Only goes to prove my contention that there's enough shavin' magic in the cans to last a lifetime. All

right, gents. You can buy it now from Jim Crow while he circulates amongst you. Twenty-five cents, while they last."

"Hawg wash!"

"Stop the sale, Jim Crow," the pitchman directed. Alert to stave off trouble before it began, the red-headed doctor scanned the crowd to locate the man who had sounded off so contemptuously. It wasn't the thin man with the bullet-scarred face, as might have been expected.

"Hawg wash!"

Doc Higgenbothem located him then, a hulking man half way back in the crowd. He had porcine eyes, and jowls that looked as though they might have rendered pure lard.

"Yes, my friend," the doctor answered the heckler, "my soap will even wash you."

A restrained laugh swept forward on that one, and the doctor was aware that he had the crowd with him. What the crowd was afraid the doctor wasn't aware of was the porcine heckler's identity. Sidemeat Saunders was his descriptive moniker, and he was one of Silk Shannon's gunmen.

He elbowed truculently through the crowd. He had been drinking, but that didn't make much difference. He was just as mean sober as drunk, and about as hard to handle one way as another.

He swaggered to a stop in front of the pitchman's tailboard, his thick hand pulling at his holstered gun. "Gonna make you eat that soap, Doc," he bragged. "Every bubble of it." He brandished the six-shooter. "Go on—lick your hand clean!"

The pitchman's face was long and lugubrious between the ends of his drooping red mustache. He looked scared to death. He had tried so hard to stave off trouble here, but now trouble had a diamond hitch on him. He not only stood to be green-sick if he swallowed the soap, but his knuckling under to the bully would probably incite the rest of them to wreck his outfit. At the very least, nobody would buy. They'd laugh him out of town.

The doctor sighed and sat down heavily on the end of the tailboard—which brought him face to face with Sidemeat.

The bully laughed hoarsely. "That's right, Doc. Git set comfortable. You'll enjoy your meal more." He poked his six-shooter into Doctor Higgenbothem's ribs. "Start eatin'."

"You sure you see somethin' to eat?" the doctor questioned mildly.

"Right there in your hand. That pile of soap suds I'm talkin' about."

"You don't see any soap suds." There was a troubled, questioning quality about the medicine pitchman's voice.

"Shore I do!" Sidemeat Saunders blazed. "No funny stuff, Doc, or I'll fill your belly with lead. It's been done before in this town."

"So I've heard," the pitchman murmured.

The crowd leaned forward tensely as Doctor Higgenbothem started lifting his handful of soap suds to his face. That was where they all made their mistake. They should have been watching the Doc's other hand.

"I still don't understand how you can see what's in my hand," Doctor Higgenbothem continued his mild protest, "when both your eyes are full of suds!"

He put a snapper on the last words, and his free hand sliced in with an edging blow against the bully's gun wrist. At the same split-wink he crammed the soap suds into Sidemeat Saunder's face with such violence that the man heeled back in the crowd and fell.

★ ★ ★

HIS gun was falling, too. The pitchman caught the weapon before it gouged dust, and he was waiting there, with it stuck in the top of his trous-

ers, when Sidemeat Saunders got up. Then the doctor went to work on the bully with his hands.

The crowd swelled away at the first interchange of blows. They were still blinking at the suddenness of it when they saw the pitchman twist in behind the bully and with a hand to collar and one to pants, give him the bum's rush.

"You try to break up my show again," the pitchman fog-horned, "and next time I'll break your head." He strode back, dusting his hands, and jumped up on his wagon. "All right, gents. Twenty-five cents, while they last."

For the next few minutes the boy did a land-office business. Then the thin man with the bullet-scarred face put in an oar, and it was apparent that the trouble hadn't ended. It had, in fact, only begun.

That bullet scar on the thin man reached from the corner of his mouth across his cheek, seeming to extend his lips in a ghastly leer. His eyes as they focused on the pitchman were like two chips of quartz.

He said, "I'm wonderin' what you aim to do with that gun you took off Sidemeat."

The pitchman answered evenly, "Ain't aimin' at nothin' with it—yet."

The scar-faced man rolled his stogy to one corner of his mouth, and slapped at his own holstered six-shooter. "Guns ain't allowed in this town, Doc, unless you got a permit from Silk Shannon."

"All right; I'll get one."

"Silk ain't here."

"In other words," the pitchman said thinly, "you're advisin' me to knuckle, and knuckle quick."

"If you like livin', yeah."

Perhaps something of the taut nervousness of the crowd warned the pitchman. He laughed suddenly, and said, "What I was aimin' to do with this gun was have an auction. Right now." He pulled the gun from his waistband, juggled it awkwardly in his hands, and went into an auctioneer's ballyhoo.

"How much am I bid for it, gents? Here's a famous gun that's likely shot many a man—maybe some of 'em from the front. How much am I bid? Who'll start it off? Proceeds goes to local charity, gents. I ain't keepin' a cent of this myself. How much am I bid?"

"One cent!" A hard-eyed gunnie from the other side of the crowd barked.

Men looked at the bidder, and at each other, and tension mounted. Doctor Higgenbothem continued to harangue, trying to work up some real competition on the bid. But that single one-cent bid was all he got.

"What's the matter?" he chided them. "You all afraid of that whiskey-pickled porker that I took the gun from? I'd lay a bet he's afraid of his grandmother."

No one dared say anything, but almost every man in the crowd could have told Doctor Higgenbothem that it wasn't so much Sidemeat Saunders they feared as it was the man who had made the sneering one-cent bid.

This man was known here in Gila Crossing as the Idaho Twins. He was only one man, and he probably wasn't even a twin, but he shot fast enough for two men, and since he was from Idaho, they called him the Idaho Twins. He was top gunner on Silk Shannon's string of sidewinders.

Doctor Higgenbothem, everyone thought, could have barked away there all night without finding anyone to buck the Idaho Twins on the bidding. That's why everyone was galvanized with surprise when a high-pitched voice interrupted the Doc' patter to announce, "One dollar!"

"Who made that bid?" the Idaho Twins called angrily.

No one answered, and Doctor Higgenbothem continued with his talk. "I've got one buck. Who'll make it two? Last call. Going, going. . . ."

"Two dollars," the Idaho Twins blared. He moved up close and looked around fiercely, daring anyone to bid against him.

"Five dollars!" the bid in the high-pitched voice came again.

"Who made that bid?" the Idaho Twins repeated, and stood on his toes while his head swiveled like an owl's as he tried to see both ways at once. Everybody's neck was craning. And everybody looked a little guilty as nobody succeeded in identifying the rash bidder.

"I'll hash somebody with gun lead!" the Idaho Twins threatened.

Doctor Higgenbothem's sing-song patter continued. "I've got five; who'll make it ten. I've got—"

"Ten dollars," the Idaho Twins snarled, "and I better not hear anybody toppin' it."

"Fifty dollars!" In direct defiance of the Idaho Twins came that high-pitched bid.

★ ★ ★

THE IDAHO TWINS went wild, butting this way and that into the crowd, trying to ferret out the bidder. Men gave way in a panic, fearful that he would gun into the crowd. He did have his guns half drawn, and when he bumped into the pitchman's young helper, he yanked out one gun.

The scar-faced gunner slowed him. "It ain't the kid," he informed. "I was thinkin' the same thing, and I had my hands over his mouth when that last bid came through." The scar-faced man lifted his hands. Under the light of the coal oil flare they showed black where some of the burned cork had rubbed off the boy's face. "It ain't the kid that's biddin' agin' you. I dunno who it is."

"I got fifty; who'll make it a hundred," the pitchman droned, as calmly as though he were still talking peanut money. "I got fifty—"

"One hundred dollars!" the Idaho Twins blared defiantly.

"One hundred dollars," Doctor Higgenbothem announced. "Last call. Going, going, going—sold to the two-gun hombre down in front."

The Idaho Twins belted up to the wagon and demanded angrily, "Hand it down."

"Not so fast, my friend," Doctor Higgenbothem said.

"You keep askin' and you're gonna get it," the Idaho Twins slashed. "Hand down the gun."

"Let's see the color of your money first, my friend," the doctor said firmly. "One hundred dollars. Slap it down on the tailboard."

The Idaho Twins glared. His body bent and his shoulders slumped menacingly while a collective gasp went up from the crowd.

Here it was at last; here was the break. A hundred dollars was a ridiculous figure to bid for Sidemeat Saunder's pine-handled old sixgun. The wonder was that the Idaho Twins had ever bid that amount in the first place. It was a deadfall cinch that, having bid it, he would never pay.

Expecting the worst, it was a shock to see the Idaho Twins let go his guns and lay a hundred dollars in bills and silver on the tailboard.

The crowd was still gawking in disbelief while the pitchman picked up the money and handed down the gun. They couldn't believe that Silk Shannon's top killer would part so readily with a hundred dollars. There must be a trick to it somewhere. . . .

And the trick wasn't long in making itself apparent.

The Idaho Twins whirled the gun. With the butt firmly in hand and the trigger covered, he drew a cold close bead on Doctor Higgenbothem.

"Now you can hand back the cash," he gloated.

The pitchman stared uncertainly, the stogy cocked high in his wide mouth. "Maybe you didn't understand, my friend. This money goes to charity."

"Silk Shannon handles all the charity donations in this town," the Idaho Twins informed. "And I'm Silk Shannon's right-hand man. Pass the money down."

Doctor Higgenbothem seemed undecided. "I don't rightly object," he said, "if it's agreeable with the rest of you here. What kind of charity cases are you aimin' to alleviate?"

"Thirst cases, Doc. I aim to buy all thirsty hombres drinks over Silk Shannon's bar."

The Idaho Twins got a guffawing laugh on that from the hardcases scattered through the crowd. But Doctor Higgenbothem didn't laugh, neither did he hand over the money. A black fire seemed to blaze in his eyes under the black sombrero.

"I can think of better charity cases. All along the line, before I hit this town, I've been hearin' about needful charity cases at Gila Crossing. There's widders and orphans here, and brave men's graves that could probably stand decoratin'. So you won't get the idea I'm talkin' wide, I'll mention a few names and places.

"There's Ella Miller, new-married to Nathaniel Miller and livin' with him on their prosperous Three K spread. But somebody—I wouldn't know who—gunned down Nat Miller and took over his holdin's. And Ella Miller's keepin' house in one of the Three K line shacks, alone, and near starvin'."

CHAPTER TWO

Doc Higgenbothem's Charity Patients

DOCTOR HIGGENBOTHEM paused. The night was hot, and the silence which had deepened with his words was a weighing force now, brooding, stifling. He went on, seemingly unaware of the tension his words had probed.

"There's other charity cases, just as deservin'. Tom Crockett's one that comes to mind, though it's almighty too late to help Tom now, or his wife, either. Shot down, the both of 'em, by night raiders that afterwards burned their homestead. I wouldn't know who the raiders were, would you? Or where the boy went? For there was a small boy, named Alexander Crockett. Maybe he was burned in the fire, along with his daddy and mother. Though some think he might have escaped to the Wind River Hills. If so, he's likely livin' there now like an animal in a cave. Some of this charity money might well go to promotin' a search for young Alexander Crockett. On the other hand maybe it could be better used by helpin' other deservin' cases that—"

"Doc, you blabber-mouthed old fool, you've helped yourself to a lonesome grave!" the Idaho Twins cut in. "You ain't been around here long enough to know what you're sayin', I reckon. But ignorance ain't no excuse, so I'm gonna kill you where you stand. Take your boot-hill ticket, Doc!"

With his thin mouth twisted, eyes glittering with a feverish light, the Idaho Twins leveled out and shot. Close up like this, it would have been impossible for him to miss. In a blaze of murderous action he started to trigger the cylinder around.

Six times the hammer snapped, but not once did the gun roar. No bullets jutted death from that long black barrel. No powdersmoke filled the air.

The red-whiskered pitchman had a faint smile on his face. "The hand is quicker than the eye," he said. "I told you that before."

A relieved sigh welled from the throats of Gila Crossing citizens. They were aware now that this nimble-fingered pitch-

man had removed the leads from the gun before their very eyes while he was auctioning off the weapon. He might be only a traveling medicine man, a shyster and a faker, but he had spoken bold words tonight. It gave their hearts a lift to know that he was still alive.

But the lift was not an enduring one. Cursing, the Idaho Twins threw down the useless gun and went into his lethal shoulder-slumping crouch. His hands stabbed for his belted guns.

"These'll roar!" he gritted.

He was right. They roared into the sky. Into the sky, because the pitchman anticipated the action and, with an underhand toss that was nearly all wrist motion and barely observable, he let go one of the little soap cans he had been hawking. The soap can, about the size of a key-winding watch, *chawked* against the Idaho Twins forehead at the instant his two guns came up to blaze their bullets harmlessly into the air, seeming to give additional momentum to the gunman's backward fall. He dropped in a heap.

There was something uncanny about it. The Idaho Twins was barbwire tough. It wasn't reasonable for him to be knocked cold with a flimsy soap tin. The thin man with the bullet-scarred face was the only one who understood all there was to know about it.

The round soap tin, in falling, struck against his ankle. *"Ow-w-w!"* he jerked uncontrollably. He bent quickly and picked up the can from the ground. It was heavy as lead. It was, he observed, actually weighted with lead. This pitchman must have bucked some tough towns in his time. He seemed prepared for any eventuality.

The scar-faced gunnie looked up almost in the pitchman's eyes. Johnny-on-the-job, the medicine-man had leaped from the end of his wagon and scooped up the guns of the fallen Idaho Twins. Now he stood there, a gangling, ludicrous figure with his red mustache and black sombrero. And yet, not quite ludicrous, either. The two guns were held too steadily, and the personal lightning he had called into play to dispatch the Idaho Twins was still vivid in their memory.

* * *

MEN showed their momentary respect for Doctor Higgenbothem then by maintaining a taut stillness. But suddenly that stillness was slashed by a vehement voice. It wasn't the voice of the man who had bid against the Idaho Twins. This was an old man's strained and quaking voice. Fear was in it. But the old man made no attempt to hide himself.

"It's true, Doc!" the old man charged. "Them charity cases you mentioned is gospel true. And I can name you others. Doc, I can even name those that's responsible."

He pulled away from his neighbors who would have restrained him. "Leave me alone. I know what I'm sayin'. And I don't care. I'm an old man anyhow, livin' on borrowed time. I can't stand silent any longer. I'm goin' to speak out, like the Doc done. Since Silk Shannon and his hellions started terrorizin' our valley,

Of the same salty clan as Len Siringo, was the pilgrim named Vick, who deals himself into a cold-deck cattle war in the May *Ace-High* lead novel. Don't miss this great epic of the open range: "The Gunsmoke Greenhorn—War Buster!" by J. E. Grinstead! May *Ace-High Western* now on sale!

there ain't no live men left here. Only dead ones and slinkin' shadow ones, afraid breathe. The Idaho Twins and Sidemeat Saunders ain't the only ones responsible. There's Scar Heffy and Hag Schwartz and Chewed Ear. There's others on Silk Shannon's murder-string too. You all know 'em. Why don't you all get together and do somethin'—"

A man near the rampant oldster said, "My Lord!" suddenly, and put up his hands, palms out, as though with flesh and bone he could ward away bullets. It was Chewed Ear Caxton who was gunning down.

"I'll drive the words back in your throat, old man," the grizzled hooter bragged. His long hair fell across his forehead and his eyes shone through with a murderous light.

But it wasn't Chewed Ear Caxton who got to the old man. Virtually every one of the gunmen scattered about the pitch were trying to reach him. The crowd milled savagely as gun-fisted hard-cases bucked through.

It was the thin man with the bullet-scarred face who got there first. With a wolfish leap he came in, gun raised high. A single chopping blow from his gun-barrel struck the old man down.

Things happened fast and hard after that. With their intended victim already taken care of and lost in the surging crowd, the rest of Silk Shannon's gunners looked for other meat.

"Git that loud-mouthed Doc!" someone bawled.

Hag Schwartz and Chewed Ear lined out shots at Doctor Higgenbothem at the same instant. The doctor, hunched like a black buzzard beneath his coal oil flare, defended himself.

With murder-lead plucking at him closely, he drove a bullet at Hag Schwartz that closed the book once and for all on the outlaw's career. Hag went down with a small blue hole in his forehead.

There were only a few, close in, who realized what had actually happened, and one of them was Chewed Ear Caxton, Shannon's grizzled gunnie.

This range had been sewed up so tight and for so long, by Silk Shannon and his hard-cases, that the boys had begun to think they were invulnerable. Now a blundering pitchman had put three men out of the running—one of them permanently!

Chewed Ear didn't hanker to take on risks of becoming the fourth. He had lived a long life because he had always chosen his odds carefully and had never tried to be a hero. That was the way Chewed Ear reasoned it.

So he wasn't much behind Hag Schwartz in hitting the ground. Once out of the pitchman's line of fire, he started crawling through the tempest-driven forest of booted feet. He didn't crawl very far until something struck him solidly on the back of the head. He grunted and rooted dirt with his chin. A dozen men stumbled over him in the next five seconds.

The surprising Doctor Higgenbothem called sharply for his blackface boy. But the youngster didn't respond at once. When the doctor sighted him, scurrying through the mob with a big stick which he had picked up. Men were fighting now, swapping blows, pushing and gouging. In close quarters fists were almost as good as guns, and there were a lot more fists. Jim Crow's contribution to the slam-bang uproar was to whip in and crack first one gun-belted hard-case after the other on the shins.

Doctor Higgenbothem waded swiftly in the kid's wake. Out from under the trampling feet where he had been knocked by the scar-faced man's gun-barrel, he Doc pried the old man and almost flung him into the back of his wagon. Then he pushed the tailboard high and heeled around to dive in again for the boy.

Surprisingly, the boy came to him, sailing through the air in the same way the old man had been propelled into the wagon. Doctor Higgenbothem saw the man with the scarred face push through to the edge of the fighting crowd and start throwing rocks at the team of mules.

* * *

THE mules started pulling. Doctor Higgenbothem's wagon started rolling. The lank doctor himself made a flying leap, caught the tailboard and vaulted inside the wagon. Bullets came streaking after him. Some of them were too high; others struck the pulled-back tail board and spattered off with a peculiar *ping*.

More than one man in the crowd realized now why the black-face boy's jigging feet had sounded that peculiar way while he was dancing on the tailboard. That tail board was a steel plate!

Yeah, he was a man used to playing unfriendly towns, most likely, and one whom bitter experience had taught to prepare for sudden evacuation. He'd never show his face again in Gila Crossing, men made silent wager.

But he'd certainly stirred up a hornets' nest the brief time he was here! From now on Silk Shannon wouldn't have everything his own way. The pitchman had shown them what resolute men could do. Maybe sometime after they had put their town to order, they could bring Doc Higgenbothem back and show their gratitude by all stocking up on his Original Double-Distilled Fireside Remedy.

These were only fleeting thoughts for a few of the more grimly determined citizens of Gila Crossing. Then the guns and shouts of Silk Shannon's men brought them back to despairing reality. The hard-cases with their guns were in complete control now.

Lined up to present a solid armed front, they bawled orders to the men who had only their fists to fight with.

"Get home! Scatter; roll yore tails, and make it sudden!" Threats accompanied the orders. "Wait till Silk gets a load of this. . . .! He won't like it none! Tomorrow we'll come gunnin' your eye-teeth out. . . .!"

Bullets at their feet scattered the citizens in every direction, out of the light of the pitchman's coal oil flare which had been left hanging from a cottonwood.

One of the gunmen however, did not share their sadistic excitement. He was the thin one with the scarred face. He stood looking after the careening wagon with something like bleak speculation in his eyes, and the stogy sticking straight out from his forbidding mouth.

Doctor Higgenbothem, from a distance, marked him there under the light, and did some speculating on his own account. A silent man, he knew, was apt to be a more dangerous enemy than a noisy one. It was more than possible that this scarred gunnie was the worst of the lot. On the other hand, there was another possibility —a puzzling and an interesting one.

Doctor Higgenbothem spoke about it later that night, after he drew up his wagon in an obscure canyon in the Wind River Hills.

The old man who had made the fighting talk tonight, and whom Doctor Higgenbothem had rescued from under the crowd's trampling feet was resting comfortably. Under the light of close hanging stars the pitchman smiled at him.

The old man elbowed himself up. "Pop Woodgate, they call me," he said. "Exceptin' for you, I'd been a goner wouldn't I?"

"Exceptin' for that scar-faced gent you would have," the pitchman told him. "He didn't take you hard as it looked. The blow was some glancin'."

"Knocked me off'n my feet!"

"And thereby saved your life," the

pitchman said dryly. "That one they call Chewed Ear was gunnin' down on you."

"If Scar Heffy saved my life," Pop Woodgate said querulously, "it was sure a disappointment to 'em both."

"Mebbe. But it's a fact I can vouch for that Scar Heffy, as you call him. He tossed my kid helper into the wagon when the shootin' got heavy on the ground."

"Might be that he likes kids," Pop Woodgate said grudgingly. "I've heard o' gunmen with soft streaks like that. But I never heard about no soft streak in Scar Heffy."

Doctor Higgenbothem was tugging thoughtfully at his mustache. "He threw rocks at my team to get 'em started away."

"More'n like he tried to make them mules stampede!"

"You don't hold by him do you, Pop?"

"Not him, nor none of 'em. No sir! And you wouldn't either, if you knowed all the hellfire and brimstone Silk Shannon's crew has burned around here. This was as purty and peaceful a valley as you ever see—until Silk Shannon came and bought the Purple Peacock Saloon, and started runnin' his brand on everything loose—"

"The law—"

"Silk Shannon's the only law we have now."

"Where does this scar-face fit in the picture? He come with Silk?"

"No, he drifted in after. Or maybe Silk sent for him. I dunno. I only know he's Silk's ace gunner."

* * *

THE kid returned from tending the mules and heard the oldster's last remark. He grinned widely. "I'm the ace ankle-cracker around here, ain't I, Doc?"

"You sure were hittin' 'em on the shins, Jim Crow," the pitchman said, approving.

Jim Crow strutted a little. "One of 'em I got on the head. That one that looked like a bear'd clawed his ear. He was crawlin' away from your bullets, hidin' behind people. I brung my stick down on his head. I bet he never knew what hit him." Jim Crow yawned.

"You better wash that cork off your face and crawl in the blankets," the pitchman told him.

The boy grinned. "Too sleepy to wash. I'll just crawl in."

"Goin' to bed without washin'?" Doctor Higgenbothem said quickly. "If I was your mother I'd tan you!"

The boy did something that was, to Old Man Woodgate, quite accountable. He made an odd noise in his throat, his lower jaw went slack, quivered. Tears bulged suddenly from his eyes, streaked down his blackened face. He turned suddenly and ran around and sat on the wagon tongue.

"What ails him?" the oldster asked, puzzled. "Stummick-ache?"

"The ache is here, my friend," Doctor Higgenbothem said solemnly, and tapped his chest over his heart. "He's been left an orphan. I shouldn't of said what I did. I wasn't thinkin'."

Pop Woodgate nodded in instant sympathy, then said gruffly, "Orphan, huh? He'll find plenty company here. Orphan's is all that's goin' to be left, if Silk keeps on exterminatin'."

"Why don't everybody pick up and leave, if the stayin's so tough?" Doctor Higgenbothem questioned. "I never seen such a grevious town and countryside."

"Too stubborn. They settled this country, most of 'em, and they won't leave it alive."

"Then why don't they fight?"

"They did," the oldster said hopelessly, "till they had the speerit plumb gunned out of 'em. They could still be made to fight, I'm thinkin'. But they're lackin' a leader."

"Sounds," the pitchman opined, "like a job for Len Siringo. Why don't somebody send for him?"

"Send for him?" the old man cackled. "If Len Siringo got one out of a hundred letters that was ever sent to him it'd be a miracle now, wouldn't it? That gunner for the law goes cruisin' up and down over a million square miles of the frontier. He's like the wind—you hear it in the trees, but where does it go? Same way with Siringo. He's a phantom gunner. You're always hearin' about him how he's come on somewheres and gun-pried somebody out of trouble, but I never met nobody that ever saw that cruisin' range-detective actual, did you?"

"No," Doctor Higgenbothem said, "I never come face to face with him myself, and me and my medicine cart, we been around." The doctor eased himself down from the wagon. "Excuse me now, my friend; I've got to go comfort Jim Crow—plucky little waif. Dunno what I'd do without him. His dancin' feet sells more medicine than all my bally-hoo. I'll tell you good-night, my friend. Tomorrow I rise early and resume my chosen work."

"You don't mean you're goin' to try to sell more medicine around here?" Pop Woodgate protested. "After the reception you got tonight?"

Doctor Higgenbothem nodded. "Gila Crossin' citizens ain't the only stubborn ones. I had a permit from Silk Shannon himself to spread my pitch in his town, and I aim to exercise it. If not one way, then another. You see before you, my friend, a man who is not too proud to work. And I'm extra proud of my Original Double-Distilled Fireside Remedy. I intend to sell same if I have to hawk it, house to house. Then there's also the matter of the charity distribution, the hundred dollars I got for rafflin' off the gun."

In the night light of the wagon, Pop Woodgate's eyes glowed fiercely. "I'm fer you, Doc—I sure am! But you ain't got a glimmer of what you're gettin' into. Take a old man's advice and keep that iron tailboard of yourn to your back."

CHAPTER THREE

Scar Heffy Offers a Stogy

NEXT morning, early with the slanted rays of the sun poking through the Wind River Hills, Doctor Higgenbothem's medicine cart wheeled into the Bar Z 2 ranchyard, the property of Herbert Craig.

Pop Woodgate rode with the doctor and Jim Crow, feeling safer in the wagon than out of it. Silk Shannon's gunnies would be riding loose today, he knew, and after the attention he had diverted to himself last night, Pop Woodgate's chances on the ground wouldn't be good.

"Herb Craig has an ailin' wife and a passel of growin' kids," Pop had informed the pitchman, "and more'n likely he could be sold some medicine."

Doctor Higgenbothem left the wagon and knocked on the door. It opened suddenly, revealing a shadowed room and four men with rifles. The rifles held unwaveringly on Doctor Higgenbothem's gaunt body.

The doctor chuckled softly. "You," he said, inclining his head toward a spare, weatherbeaten man in faded shirt and levis, "must be Herbert Craig." His glance shifted around. "And these three must be your sons. They might be still growin', like Pop Woodgate says, but I see they're all husky enough to hold a gun."

"And they can all take the ear off'n a jackrabbit at a hundred paces," the rancher cracked. "State your business mister, and get out."

"You wasn't at my meetin' last night, or you'd know. I'm a medicine-man. Doctor Higgenbothem in person, sir, in-

troducin' my Original Double-Distilled Fireside Remedy—"

"Medicine, huh?" The rancher sounded less hostile. "What's it good fer?"

"What ails you? What's your chief aches and pains?"

"Nothin' as I know of."

"What you meetin' callers with guns for, then? On account of Silk Shannon mebbe?"

"Mebbe," the rancher said tightly.

"I've figgered the set-up here," Doctor Higgenbothem informed him. "Silk's men chased me out of town last night. That's why I'm peddlin' house to house this mornin'."

"I reckon we don't need any medicine of the kind you peddle."

"If you've got an ache or pain anywhere in your whole body, you need my medicine," the pitchman insisted. "Don't you feel a chill sometimes, thinkin' about Silk Shannon? Don't you feel pain at the outlandish criminal things he's done around here? Don't you feel worry at what more he's gonna do? My medicine will banish all fears, chills and pains, my friend."

"I reckon we don't need any," the rancher insisted uneasily.

Unperturbed, the doctor said, "If I had time I could convince you. But I've got other calls to make today. Tell you what: I'm holdin' another meetin' in Gila Crossin' tomorrow night. Bring your boys and come. If I don't sell you some medicine, I'll anyhow guarantee you some amusement."

He winked broadly. "Leave your wife to home. This is a stag show, the kind women wouldn't understand. I bid you good-day my friends."

He turned, stepped off the porch, then looked back. "You might bring your rifles," he said, off-hand. "Might see some jackrabbits—with the ears still on!"

"If you know as much about Silk Shannon as you're braggin'," Herbert Craig said harshly, "you know he don't allow no guns to be brought in town."

Doctor Higgenbothem shrugged. "Bring a hide-away sixgun then."

"Silk's men have made the rounds and collected up every six in the country—or near every one. Two men have already been hung by him fer carryin' hide-aways to town."

"All right, you just come and enjoy the show, listen to my medicine spiel, and take away one of my free surprise packages."

Seated again in his cart with the reins in hand, he leaned out for a parting word. "Don't forget. Night after tomorrow. And I'm givin' away, absolutely free, a surprise package to every man there."

Doctor Higgenbothem's cart rattled on, the wheels turning with an oddly muffled sound over the lush prairie grass.

His next stop was at the Three K line shack where Ella Miller, lately widowed by one of Silk Shannon's gunners, was living alone. With her husband, she had once owned the rich Three K spread, with its sprawling ranch houses, corrals, and three line shacks. Now she was reduced to living in one of the shacks. The neighbors were legion who would have taken Ella Miller in, but Silk Shannon had decreed against it. She and her husband had resisted his criminal might, and he'd wanted to make an example of her.

The widow Miller was cordial in her invitation to Doctor Higgenbothem to "light and set". She had few callers except those friends who came briefly and furtively by night, and she was grateful for this contact with the outside world.

Her gratitude became one of speechless wonder when Doctor Higgenbothem pressed some high-number bills into her hand. She looked dazedly at the money. "I—I don't understand, sir—"

"It's all right, Ellie," Pop Woodgate assured her from the wagon. "There was a kind of collection taken up in town last

night for those made destitute by Silk Shannon's gunmen. You're right atop the list, Ellie."

★ ★ ★

THE widow let go her trembling grip on the threadbare shawl thrown over her head, and her eyes swept self-consciously over her faded gingham dress. "I—I do need a new dress," she murmured. "I—don't know how to thank you. I could buy some medicine, but I don't really think I need it."

"I'm sure you don't, ma'am," Doctor Higgenbothem told her.

Suddenly the widow gasped. "Is that," she questioned, "a real live picaninny?" She was looking wide-eyed at young Jim Crow whose head was sticking out the side of the wagon.

"No ma'am," the pitchman said. "He ain't a colored boy, actual. He's just got his face blacked to look that way. He dances for me when I sell medicine in town."

"But he hadn't ought to keep that blackin' on his face all the time," the widow said indignantly. "Tell him to come inside and I'll wash it off for him."

"You'd have to catch him first, ma'am." Doctor Higgenbothem smiled. "He's some shy of water."

"The idea! Men don't know how to take care of boys anyway. I declare, he ought to have a woman looking after him—" She broke off, fear mirrored in her eyes. "Oh!" she said, and raised quick fingers to her mouth, as though to force herself to silence.

Doctor Higgenbothem swung around to look where she was looking. Three riders, hoofing fast, had come around a bulking shoulder of granite at the mouth of the draw.

The widow Miller took a step toward the doctor. Words jetted in passionate outburst from her lips. "Get in your wagon and whip up your mules! They don't allow anyone to come talking to me. From their shack in the next canyon they keep close watch. Hurry, sir! These men are killers!"

"I should run away and leave you here, ma'am?" Doctor Higgenbothem asked gently.

"They won't bother me—I don't think. . . . Oh, the scar-faced one is here!"

The way she said it, Doctor Higgenbothem couldn't tell whether she thought the situation improved or made more grave by the presence of the bullet-scarred gunman. But her face was so wrenched with worry and fear that he decided the scar-faced man must be additional bad luck.

"I reckon I'll see this out," the pitchman told her. "Mebbe I can sell 'em some medicine."

The riders were close in by this time. They came closer before they pulled to a halt.

"So it's you again?" Scar Heffy chopped, his bleak eyes holding on the pitchman, his hand resting close to his holstered gun.

Doctor Higgenbothem stood there, silently sizing them up. The two men with Scar were the dreaded Idaho Twins and Chewed-Ear Caxton.

The Idaho Twins still carried a lump on his forehead where the doctor's leaded soap box had struck the night before; and Chewed-Ear, after the trampling he had got, looked as if he might have tangled with a den of cougars.

All three gunnies were looking as surly as cougars—hungry ones with thorns in their paws.

The Idaho Twins' thin lips curled in against his teeth. "I'm goin' to like this," he said. He was looking with baleful stare at Doctor Higgenbothem, and his hand was inching for his holstered sixgun.

"We got more than one score to settle

with this buzzard medicine-man," Chewed-Ear growled. "He run off with old man Woodgate last night, and I think it was his blackface kid that put the knob on my head."

"I reckon," Scar Heffy said, "I'll just take a look inside his wagon and see if they're there."

"I'll look with you," Chewed-Ear said.

The Idaho Twins didn't say anything. He hadn't stopped his horse at the wagon with the others. He rode closer and kept looking at Doctor Higgenbothem, with his hand inching closer to his gun-butt.

"I don't see no one inside," Scar Heffy said.

"There's a lot of beddin' and truck inside there. They could be hidin' under some of it," Chewed-Ear grumbled.

* * *

THE grizzled hooter bent closer. He appeared to be completely engrossed with his examination of the wagon interior. But over his shoulder the vicious old gun-wolf was holding a tail-of-the-eye picture of the Idaho Twins and the medicine-man. There was the Idaho Twins, bursting mad for some gun action, and showing it. And there was the medicine-man, standing there with the morning wind blowing his string tie around the side of his collar and whipping the unbuttoned coat above his knees. He appeared to be utterly defenseless.

A man couldn't be too sure of that though, Chewed-Ear counciled himself. Not after the way this sharper had pulled stogies, lead-loaded soap boxes, and bullets out of the air last night! One thing a man could be sure of, though. The Idaho Twins was showing his murderous intent so plainly that he was bound to be holding about ninety-eight percent of the medicine man's attention.

That kind of set-up was right up Chewed-Ear's alley. The Idaho Twins wasn't the only one with a killing grudge against the pitchman. Chewed-Ear had his own lethal bone to gnaw with him. And now with the pitchman's attention directed toward the more immediate menace, this was the time.

Chewed-Ear had crawled away last night. He'd taken a riding on that from the boys, and thought of it rankled. But here was where he showed them that his theory of running away to come back and fight again when the odds were better, not only kept him living, but kept other men dying.

Under cover of his body, he slid his gun from holster. Slowly he crossed it over until the long barrel was snouted in the bend of his elbow. Craftily he manipulated the butt-end of the gun to line that hungry muzzle on his victim. He got it where he wanted it. He was all set to squeeze trigger.

Then he found himself looking into a gun-muzzle that appeared to be as big as a house. The gun-barrel wasn't actually outsize; it was an ordinary .45 that Chewed-Ear faced. It was more than likely the suddenness of its appearance that made it look so big to him.

The "defenseless" Doctor Higgenbothem must have had eyes in the side of his head! At least that was the only explanation Chewed-Ear could think of. Now he was swapping aims with Chewed-Ear.

"Drop it!" Just those two words Doctor Higgenbothem uttered in his fog-horn voice.

Chewed-Ear Caxton, for all he may have been a sneak-draw gunner, wasn't a nervous one. He stayed cool now, remembering that his own draw was just as deadly as the other's.

"You drop it!" he said grimly.

"You can't shoot quick enough to get me before I get you," the doctor pointed out implacably. "If one of us dies, we both die."

"Sure," Chewed-Ear said. "So you better drop your gun."

Doctor Higgenbothem didn't drop it. But he did turn it away. With a swiveling wrist motion close in to his side, he arched his sixgun barrel and put one shot at the Idaho Twins.

The slug plowed into the Idaho Twins holster where it was fastened to his belt, and left both belt and holster hanging by shredded leather.

The Idaho Twins jerked his hand away from the gun, and Doctor Higgenbothem swiveled back on Chewed-Ear Caxton.

The move had been so breath-takingly fast that Chewed-Ear hadn't been able to take advantage of it. For once he had been surprised. Before his numbed brain could give the word to his trigger finger, the medicine man's weapon was holding on him again.

"Drop it!" Doctor Higgenbothem said once more.

Both the Idaho Twins and Scar Heffy were now sitting their saddles with their hands out where they showed. The pitchman's gunsmoke was assailing their nostrils, reminding Chewed-Ear afresh of the devastating gun-action he had just witnessed.

He made one more try. "My lead's as good as yours," he said. But his heart wasn't in it.

"Drop it," Doctor Higgenbothem said. "I'm countin' three."

He started counting, and at the second count Chewed-Ear Caxton dropped his gun.

"Howcome you seen my draw in the first place?" he asked ruefully.

"Man who's lived as long as you have by his gun," the pitchman explained, "I figgered would have tricks. I never let you out of my sight last night or now."

"Leave me ask one," Scar Heffy put in. "Where'd you learn to shoot like that, stranger?"

"Before I went into business for myself sellin' medicine, I used to do a gun act with a travelin' show."

"I've seen crack shots in gun acts," Scar Heffy said shrewdly, "but I never seen one that could draw and shoot agin' odds."

Doctor Higgenbothem shrugged. "There's always a first time for everything, my friend. . . . Now if you'll all herd close and pass down your iron. . . ."

With the gunmen defanged, the doctor waved his hand grandly. "Now you may go."

The Idaho Twins was cursing to himself. So was Chewed-Ear Caxton. They spurred their broncs at the first invitation. But Scar Heffy wasn't so precipitant.

"What's your percentage in this, Doc?" he asked softly. "You want to make a livin' sellin' medicine. All right, but why pick such tough territory?"

"Mebbe I'm like you in one way," Doctor Higgenbothem said. "Life gets monotonous for me when it goes smooth too long."

Scar Heffy laughed, but there was no mirth in it. "Somethin' else we've got in common, Doc," he said. He reached in his pocket. "Here, catch a stogy."

"Don't care if I do," the doctor said. He caught the stogy and lighted up.

Scar Heffy lighted too, then rode away to join his gun-pards.

CHAPTER FOUR

"If the Doc Is Still Alive!"

MORNING sunlight, flooding the canyon, beat down in a hot glare. Yet the Widow Miller shivered, her face still twisted with her fear. "It's been like a miracle," she said. "I don't know how you did it. You're still alive." She looked at Doctor Higgenbothem, appeal in her eyes. "But drive out of this country quick, sir. I know what these men

of Silk Shannon's are like. They never forget. They'll open up on you now at sight. They'll kill—"

Pop Woodgate cut in. "Mebbe not, Ellie. After the samples they've had of the doctor's lead-pushin', they're like to give him plenty elbow room."

"They'll only be bidin' their time, if they do."

"We'll be careful," Doctor Higgenbothem promised. "And you—you be careful too, ma'am. Everything comes to an end, even tyranny. Cling fast to hope, ma'am." He tipped his black sombrero. "I bid you good-day."

Riding away in his medicine cart, the doctor questioned Pop Woodgate, "What do you think of our scar-faced friend now?"

"Don't think nothin' different than always," Pop said positively.

"He was the first one to look in the wagon for you and the boy," the doctor pointed out. "I was thinkin' it could have been his intention to steer the others away from lookin'."

"By him lookin' first you mean, and tellin' the others we wasn't there? Could be, but I don't cotton to the idee. His reputation's agin' him. I figger him to be the worst of the lot."

"You may be right, at that," Doctor Higgenbothem admitted calmly.

All that day the doctor drove around in his cart, peddling his Original Double-Distilled Fireside Remedy, and dispensing charity money where Pop Woodgate assured him it was the most needed. And the doctor was certainly a tireless salesman, Pop Woodgate observed. During that whole long hot day of canvassing, he didn't succeed in selling a single bottle of medicine, but his spirits never drooped.

He closed out each sales talks with his invitation for everybody to be on deck in town tomorrow night for his big medicine show. And he didn't forget to emphasize the free surprise packages he was giving away.

Twice during the day they sighted riders whom Pop Woodgate identified as Silk Shannon's men. But the riders didn't come close. There was something ominous, in fact, in their obvious avoidance of the medicine wagon.

"They're cookin' up death and disaster fer us in their own way and their own time," Pop predicted tragically.

The settlers on the range also felt the impending menace.

"They're too quiet fer anybody's good," Elija Lapham, owner of the Bell horse ranch, admitted when Doctor Higgenbothem's medicine cart stopped there, and they all got to talking.

"It's been like this a couple other times, just before they layed it onto us with some new outrage. They're tryin' to scare us off'n our land is what they're doin', and I'm thinkin' they're about set to make their big squeeze play."

The rancher's eyes fastened on old Pop Woodgate. "Pop," he said, "get down out of the cart and come inside with me a minute. I got somethin' to show you."

There was an undercurrent of grim urgency in Elija Lapham's voice. Pop Woodgate got down and followed him into the house. A moment later they came out together, and they both looked worried.

Rattling away again in the medicine cart, Pop Woodgate explained, "You've showed plain enough, Doc, that you can be trusted. You know what it was Elija wanted me about? He showed me a letter. It was one he'd wrote to Len Siringo. It had come back this mornin' with some purple ink stampin' on it that said, 'Incorrect address.' There was some other writin' on it too. I'll see you personal about this, the writin' said, and it was signed S. S.

"That'd be Silk Shannon?" the pitchman questioned.

"Silk Shannon, yeah. You see, Doc, there was ten of us sent them letters to Len Siringo. It meant death if we was caught, but the man who ran the post office in Gila Crossin' was friendly to us, and we took a chance. Man runnin' the post office now, though, is one of Silk's men. Now Silk knows, and he'll strike fast."

Pop Woodgate sighed. "It was too wild a chance. Len Siringo, he moves around too fast fer his mail to catch up with him. Havin' to operate secret like he does, that makes it still harder to contact him. But it was our last chance. Now it's busted." Pop Woodgate looked dejectedly away.

Doctor Higgenbothem pulled fiercely at the ends of his red mustache. "I'm gettin' right interested in this scrap, Pop. Since the way they broke up my show last night, I'm feelin' like I got a personal stake in it. Seein' as we're drivin' around, let's figger how many of them ten men that sent letters to Len Siringo we can contact by night."

"But what good can that do?"

"You never can tell," the pitchman said. "Anyhow, they sound like fighters. Do me good to see some fighters on this dismal and dispirited range."

They saw six of the ten men by nightfall. "The rest," the pitchman said, "we'll see tomorrow."

They camped that night in another Wind River canyon. "You and the boy stay here," Doctor Higgenbothem directed. "Don't make any fire. Don't even smoke. Me, I'm gonna saddle one of the mules and ride out. Be back by mornin'."

"Where you goin'?" Pop asked in some alarm.

"Goin' to see Silk Shannon."

"He'll gun you on sight!"

"Mebbe." The pitchman's long sad face lit briefly in a somber smile. "And mebbe not."

IN THE Purple Peacock Saloon, in Gila Crossing, business was lively. Under the glow of the hanging brass lamps Silk Shannon's gunners lined the bar, drinking hard liquor and swapping talk. Three separate card games were in progress at the round-topped poker tables. The bat-wing doors swung in and out, and boots scuffed the sawdust.

That was fine for Silk Shannon, since it was his liquor that was sold over the bar, and his cut that was being collected on the card games. Silk was one who believed in playing both ends against the middle. He paid his gunmen top fighting wages, then squeezed most of it back in the Purple Peacock.

Engrossed as they were in their own pleasures, nobody took special notice of the tall stranger who pushed in through the green-shuttered doors. Not until he had stalked almost all the way through the big room and was turning into the hallway that fed onto the rooms in back.

Then a drinker at the bar grabbed the nearest man by the arm. "Hey, d'you see what I see?"

"Huh? Where?"

The first man pointed toward the back.

"I'll be hawg-tied!" the second man said.

The first man said, "Come on!"

A half dozen others, their hands on their guns, surged with him as the word went around.

Inside one of the back room, unaware of the commotion out in front, Silk Shannon sat in conference with his top gunners. The Idaho Twins was there, smoking like a furnace and moving about the room like a caged wolf, restless as always.

Chewed-Ear Caxton was there too, slumped at ease in a chair. But his eyes under his shaggy brow were bright, and his ears weren't missing anything that was said. Scar Heffy completed the

party. He sat in the corner, his face a bleak and forbidding in the shadows, his stogy a red glowing point.

Silk Shannon had a self-satisfied smirk on his face. His hair was black and sleek. Slick as a snake was Silk Shannon from head to polished boots. His shirts were silk, always white French silk, and pleated.

. . . ."so that's the size of it," he finished. "With the boys I got comin' in tomorrow and next day, we'll be all set to clean the range. We'll stamp the Purple Peacock brand on everything this side Wind River."

"That's al right," the Idaho Twins snapped, "but what I want to know is what do we do about that buzzard pitchman?"

"We've got heavier business than settlin' personal grievances," Silk came back. "He's probably makin' fast wagon tracks from here by this time."

"Like heck he is," the Idaho Twins flared. "We run into him today. He's out stirrin' up the range agin' you chief!"

"You run into him today?" Silk asked thinly. "Then why are you askin' me what to do about him?

"He got away from us this mornin'," Chewed-Ear offered.

"I wish I had him here right now," the Idaho Twins said, wrathfully. "I'd drown him in his own medicine!"

"He's anyhow thirty miles away by now, Silk assured them, then paused. "On the other hand," he let out slowly, "maybe he ain't." He was looking at the door.

The latch had lifted silently and the door was opening. It didn't open very far before a man sidled in. He was tall and gaunt in the thin graying of light from the table lamp. That light glinted dully from the barrel of the sixgun he held in his hand.

The intruder moved to put his back to the wall. There was a commotion outside as the bar loungers came running.

"Tell 'em everything's all right," the intruder said softly.

There was nothing dull-witted about Silk Shannon. Right now he could imagine how a slug from this lanky stranger's gun would feel.

"Go on back to your booze-h'istin', boys," he called. "Everything's jake in here."

* * *

THE boys went back, and the intruder chuckled. "This ain't rightly a stick-up," he said. "It was just by way of announcin' myself, so you wouldn't lead me down before I could talk. Now that we understand each other. . . ."

Surprisingly, he holstered his gun. And his eyes glinted a deadly warning to the gunmen to leave their six-shooters in leather.

"I'll come to the point, Silk," he said. "Before I spread my pitch in this town I came to you, and you said it was all right to sell my medicine here, me agreein' to cut back half the take. Last night your boys broke up my show, and I'm here to register a complaint."

"Like that, huh?" Silk Shannon looked relieved. He even smiled. "For a minute I figured we were facin' a crazy man. Well Doc, you can take your two-penny pitch and get out of town! I don't want to be bothered with you. If my men get high spirited and break up your show, that's your hard luck. Now get out—and keep livin', if you can."

"I'll keep livin'," Doctor Higgenbothem promised them somberly. "And you want to stay alive too, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you. I been cruisin' around today, sellin' my medicine where I could. And I learned that you're sittin' on a volcano. You're roddin' the show right now.

But there's only a handful of your gunners, compared to the crowd you're herdin'. They're liable to blow up—"

"I told you he was a agitator, chief!" the Idaho Twins slashed out. "He breezes in from outside and right away begins to stir up trouble—"

"Cut the lip," Silk Shannon warned. To Doctor Higgenbothem he said, "What's the rest of it?"

"You got men comin' in the next day or two, I understand. Well, till they get here, the way the tension's buildin' up, you'll be sittin', like I said, on a volcano. All right, that's where I come in. What's the two classical ways of keepin' men quiet an' holdin' 'em in your palm? Bread and circuses. Right?"

"Go on."

"They got bread. With me they'll have a circus. I got a good show I never had a chance to put on last night. Why, you need me, Silk. *You're* the one ought to be askin' *me*. I've got a show that's guaranteed to take their minds off their troubles and make 'em act like helpless lambs in the fold. They already got confidence in me, account of an advertisin' gag I pulled today, distributin' a little charity money we collected last night from a sixgun raffle. Maybe you heard about it. . . ."

"This guarantee you put on your show," Silk interrupted harshly, "is it worth any more than your medicine guarantee?"

"What's the matter with my medicine guarantee?" Doctor Higgenbothem asked sharply. "I'll have you to understand, sir, that my Original Double-Distilled—"

Silk Shannon laughed cynically. "On the level, Doc; is it any good?"

"Well," the doctor said, quieting down, "it won't hurt anybody—not any more'n that stuff you're sellin' over the bar."

"That's what I thought. All right, pick up the chips, Doc. Put on your show."

"I thank you, sir." Doctor Higgenbothem bowed, but not low enough to lose sight of anybody in the room. "And will you kindly circulate the word for your apes to leave me alone?"

"You leave *them* alone, Doc," Silk ordered. "No more of your trick gun-play. Why wasn't you born a honest gunman, Doc, instead of a penny-pickin' pitchman? Now get out. You're interruptin' a business discussion."

Doctor Higgenbothem bowed again and moved toward the door.

Scar Heffy spoke then for the first time. Without moving from his seat in the shadowed corner, he moved his hand, tossing something.

"Catch another stogy, Doc," he said off-handedly.

Doctor Higgenbothem caught it and clamped it in his wide mouth. "I thank you, my friend," he said, and went out the door.

"Bread and circuses, huh?" Silk Shannon said, looking after the departing man. "It ain't a bad idea, is it?"

"No," Chewed-Ear admitted reluctantly, "it ain't. But with every man and his brother comin' in town for the show, we'll have to do some fancy friskin' to make sure none of 'em packs in guns."

"We'll herd everybody through the North Branch road," Silk said. "And we'll pat 'em down, every mother's son. If there's a gun gets through, I'm a holy hootin' parson."

"You better look through that gun-doc's cart too," the Idaho Twins growled. "That's in case he's still livin' by then."

CHAPTER FIVE

Gunsmoke Medicine Show

DOCTOR HIGGENBOTHEM was still living the next evening when he came rattling in with the crowd awaiting him. He freely submitted to

having his cart searched. Except for the gun he wore at his belt—a safety precaution allowed by Silk Shannon—no guns were turned up. And no guns were revealed on the persons of those glint-eyed men and boys who rode in from the range. They had learned their bitter lesson about packing hide-aways.

Doctor Higgenbothem put coal-oil flares to swinging from the roadside cottonwood trees. Under the lights, the crowd seethed and muttered. It was a strange crowd, hopeful and worried all at the same time, expectant and still resigned.

Silk Shannon had his men stationed all through it. The gun-boss himself was there, standing a little aloof as befitted a war-lord, flanked by two of his lieutenants, the Idaho Twins and Chewed-Ear Caxton. As a sort of roving commission, the fierce-faced Scar Heffy shoved around through the crowd.

This was a big night for Silk Shannon. These were his sheep. Tomorrow when the bulk of his gunmen poured in he would shear the sheep. In the meantime the medicine-man would keep them quiet with his circus.

Doctor Higgenbothem stepped to the let-down tailboard of his cart and held up his hands for silence.

"My rangeland friends," he began in that voice which sounded as though it had undergone a hundred years of barking. "I come here tonight to do you good." He paused dramatically. "I'll do you so much good that when you leave you probably won't have a cent left in your pockets—but you will have, I trust, a goodly supply of Doctor Higgenbothem's Original Double-Distilled Fireside Remedy, none genuine without the picture of the fireside on each and every bottle."

He got a few scattering laughs on his opener, then said, "Seriously, I'm not taking much of your money tonight. As an introductory offer I'm making the price so low that everyone can help himself to health freedom, and prosperity—"

"Bring on the show," someone shouted.

"Ah yes, the show. I promised you a show. And before this night is over you're going to get it. Such a show as you have never witnessed before, my friends." Then, in a very low voice he added, "Pray God you never have to witness it again."

They didn't know whether they were supposed to laugh or not. Most of them didn't. From the looks of them, they had forgotten how to laugh.

"What about the free presents?" a boy shouted. Others took up the cry.

"The presents. Yes, the presents. I promised you presents, and what Doctor Higgenbothem promises, he delivers. Step in a little closer, everyone." He raised a paper-wrapped parcel in his hand and questioned, "Who'll give me a quarter for this? Sight unseen."

No one offered him a quarter. "Fake!" someone shouted. "You said it was for nothing."

"Patience, my friends," the pitchman counciled. "And confidence. "Who'll show their confidence in me to the extent of offering me a quarter for this package?"

One man finally did. He tossed the quarter on the steel-plated tail board and Jim Crow picked it up. Doctor Higgenbothem started opening the package. "Step in closer everybody," he urged, "so you can be witness that this man's confidence in me was not misplaced."

With the paper wrapper off, the pitchman held the box for the purchaser to open it. While necks were craned to see, the man who had risked his quarter pulled a crisp dollar bill from the box.

"Hold it high, my friend," Doctor Higgenbothem bellowed. "Look here everybody. This man just bought a dollar bill for a silver quarter. He never made a

better investment in his life. And that's not all. Oh no, my friends. As a token of my appreciation for his trust and confidence in me, I hereby give him back his twenty-five cents. He keeps the dollar bill—*and* he keeps the quarter!"

Doctor Higgenbothem had their interest whetted now and no mistake. They watched eagerly while he took up another package considerably larger than the first. "Who'll buy this one for a dollar? Sight unseen, just like the other one. Who'll buy it for a dollar?"

A man waved a dollar bill and the pitchman took it and placed it on top the package, and put the package down on the tailboard. The man started to pick them up.

"Not yet, my friend," Doctor Higgenbothem instructed. "Merely continue to have confidence in me for a short time longer. Stay down here close if you like, and keep your hand on your purchase, but don't open it until I tell you." He turned to his black-face boy. "Jim Crow, bring out the other gift packages."

* * *

THE boy commenced handing out packages from within the cart. They were identical in appearance to the first one, about two feet long, and they appeared to be heavy.

"Now," the pitchman announced, "if I can get about thirty more men to show enough confidence in me to put up a dollar each for one of these packages, then, my friends, I'm going to show you the kind of good news you've been long wanting to see. I guarantee not to disappoint you. Who'll be the first?"

Dollar bills waved at the doctor from all sides.

"That's the way I like to do business," he boomed. "Shove right down in front with your dollar bills, gents. Who's the next one now?"

By the time the clamor for surprise packages had worn down, the pitchman had only three left. "Who'll buy these last three?" he asked. "I'm determined to sell the whole batch, or I'm not going to let any of 'em go out. I'll give you all back your money and take back my packages."

The Idaho Twins had been getting more excited by the minute. Convinced at last that he was overlooking a good bet, he started forward with a dollar bill. Doctor Higgenbothem gave him a revealing frown and covert shake of the head.

Not many people caught it. But the Idaho Twins got it. He interpreted it the way the doctor wanted him to. "This ain't for smart money," the doctor informed by his look. "This is the old come-on, the grand bazazza for the yokels."

The Idaho Twins looked disappointed and shoved the bill back in his pocket.

Three more men crowded down front and handed over dollar bills.

"Sold out complete!" the pitchman boomed. "Now then, I'll pick up the dollar bills and each of you hold on to your package. But don't open it until I tell you to. If you do—" he laughed— "I won't give you your dollars back!"

With the dollar bills collected in a loose wad in his hand, he waved them high. "For thirty-one dollars, gents," he said mysteriously, "you've bought yourselves peace and happiness on the Wind River range."

It was odd talk for a medicine-hawker, and Silk Shannon frowned slightly. It had been his experience that these medicine-men usually confined themselves to a horrendous detailing of bodily aches and pains, with a confident guarantee that their ditch-water medicine would cure everything. But this long sad-faced spieler had hardly mentioned his patent cure.

What the pitchman said next gave Silk Shannon even more of a frown.

"Len Siringo himself," Doctor Higgenbothem orated, "couldn't back you to more peace and happiness than you'll find in these-here packages!"

A murmur of restlessness charged through the crowd. A new import to Silk Shannon's gun-string—a hard-bitten rider who had shown in only today—moved close to the chief and talked from the corner of his mouth.

Silk Shannon shook his head. "You're crazy! I never make a mistake in a man. This doc's a penny-grabbin' grafter, that's all."

"I tell you, chief," the gunman said excitedly, "I was in Buffalo Bend the time he come in and mopped up Spade Childers. He come in as a hardware merchant that time, 'stead of a medicine man. Now he's dyed his whiskers red, but he's the same hell-gunner as always. He's Len Siringo! Doctor Higgenbothem is Len Siringo!"

Silk Shannon didn't deny it now. His mind was seething, adding up facts. Something was under way here, going on right under his nose! These men who were holding the surprise packages—many of them the same men who had dared send letters of appeal to Len Siringo. The rest were all hardy rangemen. Not a weakling in the crowd. And they were all down in front spreading out now, to form a solid line at the end of the medicine cart.

The Idaho Twins had been standing close enough to hear the new gunman's words. He looked at Silk; then—hair-triggered as always—he cursed and went for his gun. "I knowed all the time there was somethin' loco about that buzzard doc! Len Siringo, huh? My lead's goin' to be the first to brand him!"

Doctor Higgenbothem was talking at the same time. "Open up the packages, gents," he was saying, "Open 'em fast, and if you're not satisfied, you get your money back!"

Under his black sombrero his eyes were twin glowing black fires. His glance ranged everywhere. He saw the Idaho Twins make his draw, and it was more than possible that the pitchman could have beat the Idaho Twins draw with one of his own. But the way it turned out, he didn't have to. . . .

★ ★ ★

SCAR HEFFY wasn't missing anything, either. Now in the showdown the bullet-scarred hardcase whom Silk Shannon had made top gunner panned out pure gold. When he saw the Idaho Twins gun down on Doctor Higgenbothem, he slapped his own six shooter from leather. There was only one shot and it barked over the heads of Gila Crossing men, outlaws and honest citizens alike. It dropped the Idaho Twins.

The Idaho Twins was dead on his feet before he fell, as Scar Heffy leaped up the wagon tailboard beside the pitchman. "Time's come that I want you all to know where Scar Heffy stands," he roared. He placed his hand on the pitchman's shoulder. *"I stand with Len Siringo!"*

A hoarse and ragged cheer went up, to be drowned in a fateful instant as Silk Shannon gave the sign to his boys to cut loose. Guns roared, and bullets blasted.

Len Siringo, working under cover as Doctor Higgenbothem, had hoped to spring his trap peacefully and without bloodshed. But now the battle was spilling over, his giant voice blared, "Hand it back to 'em boys!"

From out of their surprise packages the Wind River cowmen had snagged their sixguns. One loaded gun in every package, plus a handful of extra bullets. With yells of rage and long-delayed triumph, they drew quick sights and "hand-

ed it back" to Silk Shannon's gunmen.

Len Siringo's own famed peacemaker was bucking as he lined out lethal lead and jumped to the ground. "Charge 'em, boys!" he ordered, and himself led into it.

Scar Heffy fought side by side with him, a chill pleasure showing on his face as he drove bitter lead before him.

With two such indominable leaders, the men who had arrived to be merely amused by a circus, charged after them. Lead sprayed the air with savage whine and whistle. But still the Wind River cowmen moved up with Len Siringo, and the gunmen of Silk Shannon moved back.

"Keep crowdin' 'em, boys," Len Siringo shouted. "We'll have 'em on the run in a minute!"

It did look for a minute there as though it would work out that way. Len and his army kept crowding them and they kept retreating backward, faster and faster.

But Silk Shannon's reinforcements arrived from the saloon in time to prevent a rout. They came in shooting, and Silk's line wavered and held. The battle seasawed then. Lead whipped and drove, and victory hung in the balance. Then Chewed-Ear Caxton pulled a fast one that threatened to put things right-side-up for Silk Shannon.

The cowman's charge had carried the battle beyond the space lighted by the coal oil flares. Chewed-Ear, as always playing a crafty game, was holed in behind the trunk of a cottonwood. When Scar Heffy came gunning past the tree, Chewed-Ear characteristically leaned out and leveled at his back.

But he didn't see Len Siringo come around the tree on the other side. He could have gunned Chewed-Ear without the old gun-wolf ever knowing what had hit him. But he gave him a chance.

"I've got you covered," he bawled.

Chewed-Ear jerked his gun-arm around, snarling. For once he was on a spot where he had to shoot face to face. It was a fatal spot for Chewed-Ear. Len Siringo's lead dropped him with the same stark sureness that Scar Heffy's lead had shown against the Idaho Twins.

Silk Shannon was still in there gunning, and so was another hulking renegade. With Silk urging on his reinforcements from the saloon, the deadlock broke.

Both Len Siringo and Scar Heffy were fighting, but the gun-weight of Silk Shannon's hard-cases was too much for them Step by step, they had to fall back. They retreated, and carried Len Siringo and Scar Heffy back with them.

To come near throwing off the terror-blight which gripped their range, to come so near gunning their way to peace and freedom, and then at the last minute to fail! Bitterness submerged the men of Wind River, sapping their will to fight. Silk Shannon was too much for them, too much even for the redoubtable Len Siringo! Silk's men were too many, and too tough. . . .

But suddenly a quickening ran through the dispirited men. And at the same time a questioning worry gnawed at the minds of Silk Shannon's gunners. The gunners turned quick nervous looks behind them, as back in the darkness sounded voices of new men coming into action. Eager, confident voices. . . .

★ ★ ★

GILA CROSSING men heard such hoarse, fragmentary utterances as these: "We're comin', Len! Hang on, old-timer. . . ."

"We'll gun Silk Shannon to doomsday!"

"We're comin', holdin' our fire, till we're close in. . . ."

The voices began to get on the nerves of Silk Shannon's crew. They didn't see any new reinforcements, but they lost

some of their fighting efficiency trying to locate them. And Len Siringo's army, on the other hand, took fresh courage.

Then still another break came their way. Though Silk Shannon's men hadn't yet been able to locate the noisy enemy at their rear, they were suddenly aware of reinforcements in from ahead of them. Armored reinforcements!

"Split to both sides, boys!" Len Siringo blared, and with Len himself leading one group, and Scar Heffy rodding the other, the battling cowmen separated into two fighting units, and let Len Siringo's medicine cart come through.

Old Pop Woodgate was driving the cart, and he was *backing* it. Backing those mules slowly and inexorably into the fight. The high metal-plated tailboard of the cart was lifted now, protecting the mules against Silk Shannon's bullets. It also protected a half dozen sharpshooters inside the cart who were crouched behind the armor plate, blazing lead.

"Mow 'em down!" Silk Shannon raged to his uncertain gunners.

They tried to. They threw lead in a blistering hail. But it splashed harmlessly against the armored tailboard while that juggernaut of death backed closer.

That wasn't all. Len Siringo on the right flank and Scar Heffy on the left, led their men in a sudden charge.

It was too much for Silk Shannon and his hired fighters. Len Siringo on the right. Scar Heffy on the left. A wheeled battleship backing into them from the front. And a phantom voiced army coming at them from behind!

Silk Shannon's men broke and ran in every direction. Len Siringo had merely to put his foot out and trip the dreaded Silk Shannon when he found the gun-chief running in panic, butting between hitchrack and cottonwood trees in his insensate fear.

After the hunt was over, and Silk Shannon's crew were either captured or hopelessly scattered, the victorious cowmen drifted in with their prisoners to Len Siringo's medicine cart.

The man, red mustache, black sombero, stogy and all, stood again on the let-down tailboard. He waved a wad of dollar bills in his hand. "Anybody want their money back?"

They drowned his words with their cheers, and the echoes wafted out beyond the town. They let him know they were well satisfied with their dollar purchase.

When he could get a word in, Silk Shannon snapped, "What I'd like to know is where did that army of yours come from at the last minute?"

Len Siringo turned cold eyes on the gun-chief. Shannon was no longer the silken dandy. His clothes were torn, and grimed with dirt and powder-burns.

Len Siringo said, "What army?"

"The one that come in from behind us there at the last, and won the battle."

"Maybe this'll give you your answer." The words seemed to come from behind Len Siringo.

Silk Shannon half turned, then looked around again. "Like that, huh?" he questioned sheepishly.

Len smiled grimly. "That time I did fancy shots on the stage, there was a fella in another act who was a ventriloquist. I learned a few tricks from him. And Pop Woodgate, and Jim Crow, here, helped me on this job."

"So you was the one biddin' again' me the other night," one of Shannon's men blurted, "when you tossed your voice around and run that raffled six-gun up to a hundred dollars!"

★ ★ ★

A SURPRISED murmur swept the admiring crowd. They looked toward Jim Crow who was swinging his feet from the tailboard of the medicine cart. Jim Crow was deep in excited con-

versation with no other than Scar Heffy.

Len Siringo explained about Jim Crow. "It was the boy that hunted me out where I was bullet-rangin' and told me how desperate things were here, and sold me a bill of goods on droppin' everything else and comin'. We rigged up this blackface act so he could be on deck to point out the people I had to know around here, without himself bein' recognized."

"You remember the charity case I was remarkin' about the night before last? The one about Tom Crockett and his wife bein' gunned down by night riders and their house burned? And their young son, Alexander Crockett, who some said perished with his folks, and some said escaped to the Wind River Hills?"

Len Siringo's hand waved affectionately toward Jim Crow. "Get acquainted with young Alexander Crockett again, folks. He's back on his home range."

Again they cheered, and crowded close. Then those in front noticed something peculiar about Scar Heffy, the top gunman of Silk Shannon, who had so strangely thrown in with Len Siringo.

Scar Heffy had burned cork smeared on both sides of his face. They didn't see how it could have gotten there, unless he had been holding the blackface boy in close embrace against his cheeks.

Len Siringo explained some more, pointing to Scar Heffy. "Now that you've met young Alexander Crockett, folks, meet Tom Crockett, his father!"

Scar's eyes were moist as he did a little talking for himself. "More dead than alive," he said, "I got away too, that night of Silk Shannon's massacre. But I'd seen my wife killed before my eyes. And my boy"—his arm tightened about Jim Crow—"I thought he was dead too. I always was a pretty handy shot, if you recollect. When I got able, hidin' out in the Wind River Hills, I spent all my time practicin' to be a better shot, with only one idea in my head, to come back here and get Silk Shannon and his whole killer crew. I'd lost seventy pounds, and I had this bullet-scarred face that—well, even my own son didn't recognize me. I signed on with Silk Shannon, like you know, always bidin' my time. . . .

"But my own son and Len Siringo brought things to a head a little quicker'n I'd planned. I recognized my son when I caught hold of him the first night Len Siringo opened up here. I tried to play guardian angel over him after that. I was tryin' to figure out the doctor too."

"And I was tryin' to figure out Scar Heffy," Len Siringo supplied. "We both had too much at stake here to let our hair down without bein' almighty sure."

"I hope to settle down here again," Scar Heffy said, "and take up my life as best I can where I left off." He paused, a little self-consciously. "The Widow Miller has taken a shine to Jim Crow, and—"

"And pop's took a shine to the Widder," Jim Crow piped up.

Men laughed good-naturedly, and Scar Heffy said, "I reckon we'll all get along, now that Len Siringo has tamed our range for us."

"I only showed you the way," Len said modestly. "You done it yourselves, all workin' together."

"What about Doctor Higgenbothem's Original Double-Distilled Fireside Remedy?" someone shouted. "We ain't seen nary a bottle."

The great man actually grinned. "You ain't like to. I never made up a single bottle. Instead I concentrated entire on the surprise packages."

"Three more cheers for Doctor Higgenbothem!" Pop Woodgate shouted.

And their cheers rocked the range, which would never again need the ministrations of Doctor Higgenbothem's gunsmoke tonic.

THE END

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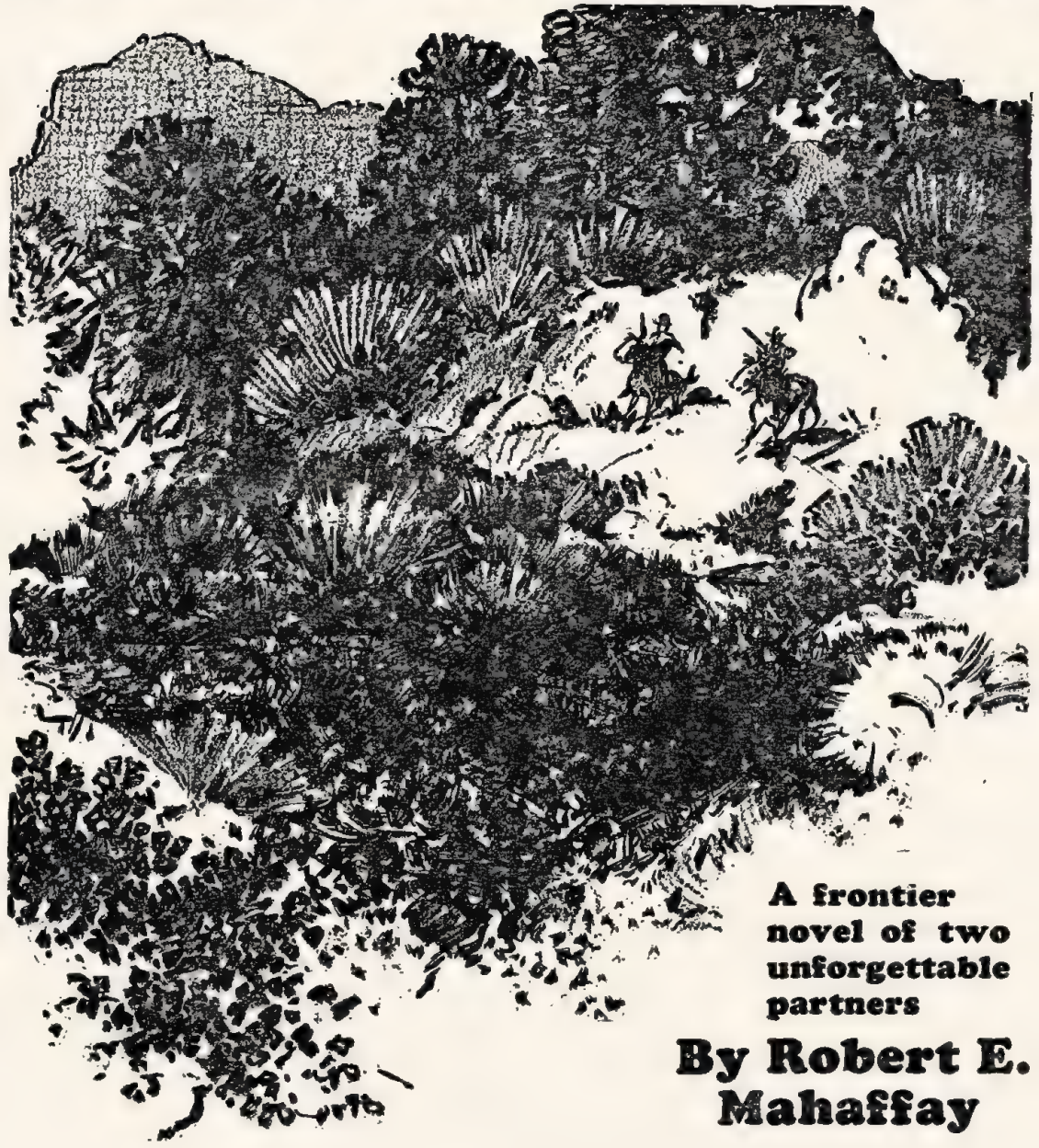

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Nero Jones swung his head for a quick look back over the trail which came along through the Idaho mountains like a hurrying snake. Nobody in sight yet.

Beyond him was the rattle of a stream. He went up the slope toward it, and down the bank, his black eyes roving carefully. He saw the man at once, but couldn't make out what he was up to.

The man was seated on the bank, near the spot where the river flattened out into more or less of a ford; he was oblivious to the crunching of stones under the buckskin's hoofs. Even when Nero Jones stopped beside him, he didn't look up.

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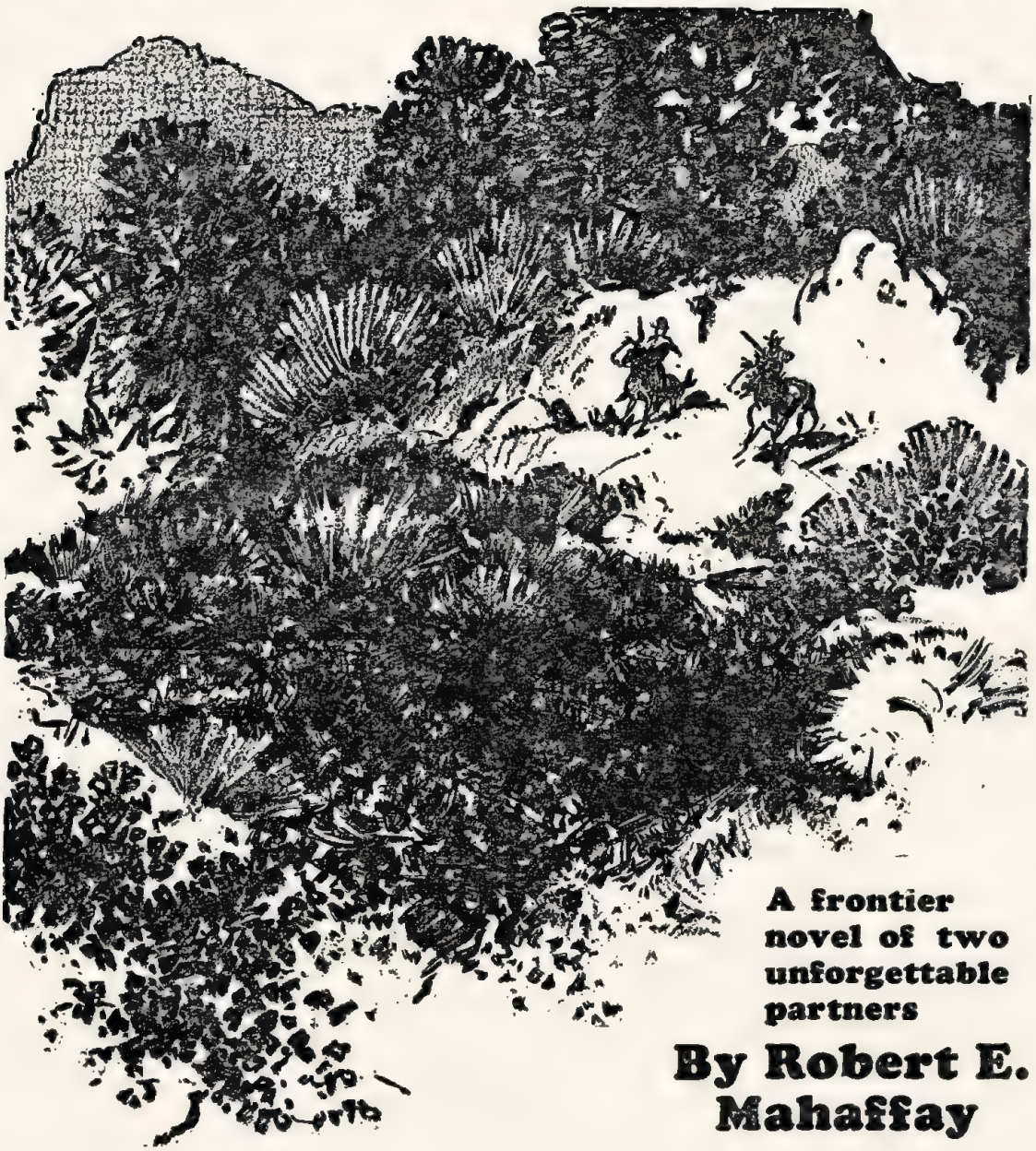

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He was working earnestly to get a .30-30 adjusted properly, tucking the

muzzle carefully between the ribs over his heart, seeking to brace the butt against a rock.

Nero Jones coughed. "Things that bad with you, brother?"

The other lifted his head, looking annoyed. He had a long gaunt face with a rusty black beard that grew high on the cheekbones.

"It ain't how bad they are," he said. "but how bad they aim to git."

Nero Jones chuckled amiably. "What's to come," he remarked, "is something none of us knows about. Better wait and look it over. My name's Nero Jones."

"Mine's Keg Elfinstone, an' if there's one man alive who knows what's comin', it's me. Bad luck. Just bad luck. That's all I ever had an' all I'm ever goin' to have."

"But nobody's luck is all bad."

"Mine is." Elfinstone put down the gun and gestured with his left hand from which the forefinger was missing. "Take just today, if you want a sample."

Nero Jones kept one black eye on his back trail. He asked, "What happened today?"

" 'Bout the same thing that's been happenin' all my life. I was takin' a wagon load of stuff across the river here. I was pullin' down to the ford when a wheel busted. Well, I unhitched the mules an' jacked up the wheel. While I was doin' that the mules run away, an' while I was chasin' the mules the wagon slipped an' rolled on three wheels into the river. Wouldn't do it again in a million years. Wouldn't 'a' done it this time, only for me. Had a load of dried apples. They swelled up an' busted out of their boxes an' I lost the whole shebang."

"You were doing somebody a favor, man. Dried apples—"

"That ain't all. I got home an' found that the back of my stove had fell out, an' my cabin burned down."

Nero Jones pounded the saddlehorn with his closed fist. "Just the man for me!" he exclaimed. "Exactly the man I've been looking for!"

Keg Elfinstone surveyed him skeptically.

"My luck," declared Nero Jones, "is just the other way around—all good. And I'm as fed up with it as you are with yours. If we were to form a partnership, say, maybe it would buck yours up and tone mine down. Then we'd both be satisfied."

"You'd need an all-fired lot of your brand," Elfinstone said doubtfully.

"I've got an all-fired lot," Nero Jones assured him. "How good are you with that rifle?"

Elfinstone grinned. "When I'm feelin' mean I kin pick burrs out of a bronc's tail at a hundred yards."

"That's fine," declared Jones briskly, "because—"

He cocked an ear abruptly toward the back trail, then slid out of the buckskin's saddle. He dragged the reluctant Elfinstone into the shelter of some boulders lining the bank, and as he did so, a Winchester spat wickedly. The slug hit one of the boulders, and screamed its way across the river.

"You sure git a partnership to operatin' in a hurry," Elfinstone said. "What is all this?"

"Pair of your Idaho hardcases lookin' for gold," Jones told him. "I left Lewiston with quite a poke of dust, and they came wolfing along behind me. Bronc's played out, so I couldn't run for it. Lost my gun, so I couldn't make a stand."

"What's so lucky about that?"

Nero grinned. "Found you, didn't I?"

* * *

THERE were two guns up on the bank now, both of them peppering the nest of rocks with lead.

Keg Elfinstone was hunched down on

his belly, scowling. "A little more of this," he said, "and I'm goin' to git mean."

Nero Jones had been studying the pocket and the surrounding terrain. The river was an effective wall behind them. "Hold on," he said. "They can't do anything where they are but waste cartridges. They'll figure that out pretty quick and swing over and climb that ridge. From there they can rake us like throwing birdshot into a hen coop."

"That some more of your luck?"

"It sure is. They think I've got a short gun, nothing more. They'll scramble up there like Injuns to a bar, laughing because they're out of range."

"I can hit anything I can see," Elfinstone muttered.

"Then get set and keep your eyes peeled."

The shooting slackened, then finally stopped. Jones nodded. "There they go."

Presently, far up on the ridge which rose from the stream bed, there was movement in the timber. Two horsemen came into view for an instant before disappearing again. They were working, evidently, for a rocky knoll that was clear of brush.

Keb Elfinstone was sitting with his back propped up by one rock, his gun lying across another.

He looked at Jones. "What do you make it?"

"Six hundred yards?"

"A shade under, I'd say. Just a shade."

Things followed swiftly after that. The two riders came out on the knoll, one of them swung down and began to level his rifle across his horse's saddle.

"Oh, no," Elfinstone grunted. "Not this time." His gun thundered.

Up on the ridge the rifle spilled across the river side of the saddle, and the gunman dropped limply on the other. His companion, who had leisurely withdrawn a boot from its stirrup, took one look, then rammed it back in, and careened forward in the saddle, spurs driving home.

Elfinstone squeezed the trigger again; the racing figure seemed to jerk, but he vanished into the timber without falling.

"There's a feller," said Elfinstone in disgust, "who can make up his mind mighty quick. One more look and I'd of had him."

Nero Jones grinned. "Where would you say he was heading?"

"He'll likely hit Dutchman's Elbow if he keeps on. That's a gold camp—a mean one."

"Maybe we'll see him again. Dutchman's Elbow is where I'm going. We got us a horse for you, anyhow. I'll meander up and get him."

"What do I want with a horse? I ain't going anywhere."

Nero Jones bent an assured and smiling glance upon him. "Keg, you're my luck—and my partner. I've got some mighty important business in Dutchman's Elbow, which means that you have too."

He stepped into the buckskin's saddle, and after a stiff climb reached the rocky knoll. The rifleman was dead. Though Jones remembered having seen him in the saloon in Lewiston, there was nothing on his person to indicate his name. Jones salvaged his revolver and cartridge belt, gave the man an abrupt burial under a slide of rock. Then he picked up the horse, a stubby black, and rode back to the river.

Elfinstone worked to lengthen the stirrups. Up on his feet he was a big man, with shoulders like a slab of rock and hands as powerful as knotted pine roots.

"Might as well go along," he said. "I got nothin' to lose, I reckon. Picked you up a gun, I see."

"He was through using it. By the way, Keg, how much money have you got?"

"Dollar—dollar and a half. Makes me feel kind of cheap, chippin' it in with that poke of dust you got."

"Oh, I haven't got that any more. I lost it the same time I lost my gun."

"Lost it!"

"River bank busted under me and pitched me into the water. With the gold and the gun I would've drowned, so I shed 'em."

Keg Elfinstone gaped at him. "Where's the luck in that?"

"I didn't drown, did I? I've got another gun already, and a little gold, more or less, is easy enough to come by."

They were riding side by side along the trail which bored steadily into the timber-coated hills. Elfinstone studied his partner from beneath knitted brows. "Just what might your business be?" he demanded at length.

Nero Jones smiled and held up his hands. Elfinstone observed their slenderness. They weren't lumps at the ends of his wrists; there was something about them that made them seem endowed with a life and deftness wholly their own. Then, too, there were Nero Jones' well-cut black coat and polished boots.

"Tinhorn?"

"I've been called that," Nero admitted.

"Dog-gone!" said Keg Elfinstone. "And I thought my luck was goin' to change!"

CHAPTER TWO

Dutchman's Elbow

THE saloon at Dutchman's Elbow was a sorry affair. It was the anchor for the string of shacks which had been thrown up on a knife-narrow shelf between the river and a perpendicular cliff. Like a nesting hen, the Dutchman had built as close as possible to the gravel bar which put a jog in the river and had, according to rumor, made him rich.

Nero Jones stood before the hand-hewn pine bar, juggling three little silver penknives. Keg Elfinstone watched him, his eyes growing larger by the minute; the bartender, too, had broken off activity.

Nero began to spin the knives—each had two open blades—as he tossed them up and caught them, and presently he added three cartridges to the knives. He used only one hand; his black eyes appeared to wander casually over the stained bar, the sagging walls and the three uneven gambling tables.

A moment later, one at a time, he ate the penknives and stuffed the cartridges into his right ear.

The bartender drew a long breath. He was a paunchy man, with a short stubble of red beard and no front teeth. "That sure earns you drinks," he declared with a lisp. "Stick around till the boys show up, an' do that trick again."

Nero Jones nodded agreeably. "Glad to. My name is Jones and my friend is Elfinstone. We're looking for the Dutchman."

The bartender had set out the bottle. His hand froze on the neck of it; his bearded face suddenly became set and secretive.

"You'll have a long look," he said.

"So? How long has he been gone?"

"He left a week ago."

Nero Jones reached for the bottle, and the barkeep reluctantly withdrew his hand. "Where'd he go?" Jones asked.

The bartender shrugged. "Nobody knows. He just left. Some fellers claim he's dead. They seem pretty sure about it. Maybe he got to pokin' his nose in where it didn't belong."

"Maybe. The Dutchman had a brother, didn't he? The way I heard it, they ran into a pocket that made 'em both rich. The brother went East to blow his stake, but the Dutchman stayed. Had a fortune in dust an' nuggets buried somewhere."

The bartender's eyes were glittering. "If I was you, Jones, I'd call him dead."

Nero chuckled. "You know, a man in

Lewiston told me that, too. Man named McCord. Seemed to be set on my believing it."

"Let me tell you something," the bartender said coolly. "You're new here an' you're a fool if you mess in any business that Hart McCord has in these mountains. The Dutchman is dead. Leave it ride that way."

"Maybe I would, only kind of a queer thing happened." Jones poured another drink and passed the bottle to Elfiinstone. "When I pulled out of Lewiston two gunhawks trailed me. They caught up with me twice and jumped me twice. They were real deadly about it."

The bartender opened his mouth, but said nothing.

"The way I look at it," Nero continued, "they wouldn't have bothered about that if the Dutchman had been as dead as McCord claimed. Nobody cares much if you go poking around for a corpse. But if you're looking for a man who's still alive, and are apt to find him, that's a different story."

* * *

THE bartender's face had flushed a deep red beneath his beard. He had dropped both hands under the bar; his neck muscles were quivering.

Keg Elfinstone coughed. With a hitch of his big hands he brought his rifle up and pretended to scrutinize its action.

"May have got it a little wet," he apologized. "What with scramblin' around in the river an' all—"

"If you've got a deck of cards handy," suggested Nero Jones, "there's something I'd like to show you."

The bartender took a long look at the gun lying flat on the bar—a swivel of six inches would put a bullet into his chest. He breathed heavily, and brought a pack of cards from under the bar.

Nero Jones broke the seal and riffled the pasteboards idly. "I do some gambling on and off," he explained. "Maybe you could use a house man?"

"I got one."

"Is he any good?"

"Good enough to suit me," the bartender said sulkily.

Nero pushed the deck across to him. "Cut." When the barkeep complied, he placed the cards flat on the bar and peeled off two hands of stud.

Showing in front of the bartender were the ace, king, queen and jack of hearts. Nero Jones had dealt himself the same cards in clubs. The bartender shrugged and turned over his hole card, the eight of hearts.

"Almost," smiled Nero Jones, "but not quite." He exposed the nine of clubs, and swept up the cards.

"Draw," he murmured. He accepted a cut and dealt the hands. "Cards?"

The bartender shook his head, his jaw tightly clamped.

"None for me either," said Jones. "What have you got? The heart flush again? That's too bad. A full-house here—fives over threes. Try again."

Eyes hot and wrathful, the bartender followed each move of his slender fingers.

The tinhorn of Dutchman's Elbow had his own magic formula for dealing with hombres too hot to handle. And the hero of William R. Cox's "Texas Lawmen—Keep Out!" in June *10 Story Western*, had another, equally effective method. You'll want to read this smashing town-tamer novel. On sale April 10th!

It made no difference. The bartender got his heart flush. Nero Jones shook his head regretfully. "Four treys here. Tough luck—you with that flush that keeps cropping up. You'd have lost considerable money if you'd been betting 'em. Maybe next time—"

The bartender began to swear. He picked up his five cards and tore them in two.

Nero was smiling. "You tell me, barkeep. Do I gamble for the house, or against it?"

The bartender stared for a long time, licking his lips. "What kind of a deal do you want?" he asked hoarsely.

"You're running no risks," Nero said. "I do the work. I'll give you ten per cent."

The bartender's face purpled. "Ten per cent? You're crazy! Git outa here, and take your ten per cent with you!"

Nero Jones still smiled. He wasn't a tall man, and he looked slender. But the way he carried himself hinted at exceptionally resilient strength and a quickness rarely found in a man.

"I won't haggle with you," he said. "Figure the gambling money that's floating loose in this camp, and figure ten per cent of it. Balance that against having yourself cleaned out of this place. You looked sour when you talked about your house man. Unless I'm wrong, he's been running you in the hole."

"Luck runs in streaks," said the bartender sullenly.

"Not mine. You've had your look at it. You can buck it, or take your cut. Which'll it be?"

* * *

THE bartender rubbed at the red stubble on his jaws; that secretive look took shape again in his eyes. "I'll play your game, Jones. Get yourself in a jam, though, an' you're on your own hook. I'll put buckshot into you before I'll back any play you have to make."

"Fair enough," Nero told him. He nodded toward the stove at the lower end of the bar. "Looks like you can throw together a meal on occasion. We'll take a pair."

While the bartender put steaks into a skillet, Nero Jones selected his chair for the evening. It was against the far wall, commanding a view of the bar and the front door.

Keg Elfinstone, his long face sober, slid into a chair beside Jones. "I'll go a long ways to side a man," he said bluntly; "but I won't back the kind of tinhorn dealin' you done just now. That's flat. You an' me kin wind up—"

The sparkle left Nero Jones' black eyes. "Keg, I don't use that. I don't need it. I'll gamble an honest man for his money, but I won't flim-flam him unless he tries it on me first. That's flat, too."

Keg Elfinstone drew a long breath. "I'll believe that. I sure enough want to. One thing, though, I'm curious about. Suppose he'd turned you down? We're broke."

Nero Jones chuckled. "That's my luck, Keg. He needed a house man, and I happened to come along."

"Happened to?" Elfinstone croaked. He was still red in the face when the steaks were brought.

They were halfway through their meal when a man in a green mackinaw entered and stamped to the bar. He was short, thick-chested, with a dark face channeled deeply about the mouth.

The bartender made an abrupt low-voiced comment; the man looked over his shoulder at Nero Jones. The two conversed further in whispers before the newcomer went on to the back of the saloon and let himself out.

"Know him?" asked Nero Jones.

Elfinstone nodded slowly. "Spade Malone. He'd have been hung before now if the law in these gold camps amounted to shucks. Some folks claim he draws down pay for doin' Hart McCord's gun work."

"Notice anything peculiar about him?" Nero asked.

"Not exactly, no."

"He had his left arm in a sling. Under his mackinaw. It was him you winged back there on the trail."

Elfinstone swore. "Then it was McCord's dust you won in Lewiston, and it was McCord sent them two gunhawks after you?"

"That's right."

Elfinstone chewed reflectively. "I still can't figger where the Dutchman fits into it—if he ain't dead."

"He's not dead. He disappeared because McCord got him. McCord wants his gold, but the Dutchman is too stubborn to tell him where it is. McCord is afraid to kill him for fear he never will find out, but there's a lot he can do to the Dutchman without killing him. McCord's doing it, and the Dutchman's taking it and keeping his mouth shut," the gambler said.

Elfinstone scowled. "You think he'd know he hasn't got a chance and give up."

"He thinks he has a chance," said Nero Jones.

He drew a battered envelope from his pocket and spread the letter in front of Elfinstone who scanned it laboriously.

Dear Dan,

It looks like trouble is shaping up here. McCord is crowding me, and I reckon he aims to crowd me more. If you could get back here we could clean up and pull out together.

Yours,
Dutch

Elfinstone looked up. "Who's Dan?"

"Dutch's brother. It's him Dutch is waiting for."

"Where is he?"

"Dead," Nero replied softly.

"Maybe it ain't any of my business," Elfinstone said, "but I can't help wonderin' why you're pitchin' in on what looks like a lost proposition."

It was a long time before Nero Jones answered, "Dan was a friend of mine."

Something in the way he said it told Keg Elfinstone that it was only half an answer. In the dark eyes of Nero Jones was an expression that brought a prickling to the back of Keg Elfinstone's neck.

CHAPTER THREE

Make Your Move, Tinhorn!

WITH the coming of darkness, miners began to straggle into the saloon. It had begun to snow, and their coats were laced with scattered white flakes.

Gradually the room filled with the smell of hard-working men, the fumes of strong tobacco and stronger pipes, the odor of raw whiskey. Nero Jones whistled softly as he saw leather sack after leather sack of gold dust thumped onto the bar. There was plenty of money in the camp.

Finally he rapped on the table top, smiling, and lifted his voice: "The gambler buys a round. It's the last thing you'll get out of him free. Take it and come after more if you think you can get it."

The round was drunk. The six other chairs at Nero Jones' table were taken.

The game opened on a cautious level. A prospector with a flaming red beard and hair that fell to his shoulders won the first pot. He swore ruefully. "Early ripe, early rotten. If I had any sense, I'd quit now."

Four more hands went by. Nero took one of them, dropped out of two, and

lost a small pot on the fourth. It didn't become a poker game until a dark little man with a flat nose bet a pair of kings back to back against the pair of tens Nero had showing.

Broken-Nose raised, caught a thumping raise in return, and had to call. He lost better than a hundred dollars when Nero Jones flipped over the third ten.

Broken-Nose snarled, "Ever bluff, gambler?"

Nero Jones nodded gravely. "Exactly half the time. All you have to do is pick 'em."

The game settled down to business. Glasses clicked, the cards rustled mockingly; but there was less talk.

Keg Elfinstone had ranged himself against the wall in a tilted chair, some little distance to the left of the table. His eyelids were drooped, his chin was on his chest, but not much escaped him. The game was an hour old. The three players who dropped out had been replaced.

Elfinstone coughed, and scraped his chair against the wall. Nero Jones turned his cards down, settled back. A man had come into the saloon, brushing at the snow on his shoulders. He was nearly as tall as Elfinstone, but heavier. He wore a mustache and a carefully trimmed beard on jaws that were wide and solid. Brows which met across the bridge of his nose shaded challenging scornful eyes.

Men greeted him, though not warmly. He went to the bar, had a drink, and talked for a moment with the bartender. Then he strolled to Nero Jones' table. He didn't look at Nero Jones; his glance swept the others.

"Anybody here ready to quit?"

Broken-Nose pushed his chair back hurriedly. "I'm through, Hart. He's got me cleaned."

Hart McCord laughed. "He cleaned me in Lewiston. I want another crack at him." He dropped lithely into the chair and looked directly at Nero Jones. "Make it good, gambler—and keep it straight. You're goin' out of this place with just the hide on your back."

Nero Jones nodded. "It's been done, and I won't say it can't be done again. Nobody, though, has ever talked me down to the hide."

McCord's eyes grew narrow. "Maybe then, gambler, you still have somethin' to learn."

The temper of the game changed abruptly. Hart McCord took hold of it and began to force the play.

Nero Jones still smiled. His lean face, undistinguished save for the alertness of his black eyes, revealed no hint of strain; his slender hands with their peculiar life shuffled and dealt with precision. At intervals he won.

What was more important, he allowed himself to be backed into no costly corners.

Hart McCord tried. He was gambling ruthlessly, centering his efforts on Nero Jones. He was inviting a two-man fight, and Nero Jones was refusing it.

If Nero appeared blind to the situation, the rest of the table didn't. One by one the others withdrew, until the game had narrowed to Jones and McCord, a miner who was too drunk to know better, and the burly Spade Malone who had returned unobserved to the saloon.

* * *

NERO JONES wondered if Malone had been the house man. He could play poker, but in this game he was deferring strictly to Hart McCord.

McCord was slowly growing angry at Nero Jones' refusal to be smoked out. The gambler was winning steadily.

When Jones shrugged and tossed away a low pair, McCord, who had only a king and queen showing, sneered, "No nerve, gambler?"

Nero smiled. "Enough."

Two hands later he stung McCord hard. Of McCord's exposed cards, the highest was a queen. Nero Jones' high card was a jack. McCord bet twenty-five dollars. Jones, after some hesitation, raised it twenty-five. McCord grinned, boosted it two hundred, and shot his glance wickedly across the table.

Jones had folded before, on less provocation. This time he counted out the two hundred in chips, added currency and a sack of gold dust.

"Up five hundred," he said.

McCord stared at the cards in front of Nero Jones. He lifted his glance to Jones' lean face, found nothing there to help him. He started to swear, but there was quiet in the room; and the circle of miners was watching him intently. He changed the oath to a chuckle. "Your bluff's good, gambler. Take the money—it's yours."

"Never throw a bluff," said Nero Jones, "if it isn't a good one."

He scooped up his cards, and by accident or design the hole card slipped through his fingers. It was the six of diamonds, and matched no other card in his hand. He had been beaten on the board.

Hart McCord, who held only the queen, had been out-bluffed. Fury brought out the muscle on his broad jaws.

"I'll whip you, gambler," he said between his teeth, "if it's the last thing I ever do."

"Your deal," said Nero Jones softly.

For a moment Hart McCord sat juggling the deck in his powerful hands. Behind and beyond the wrath in his eyes was another expression—something secret and sure and dangerous. Win or lose here, McCord was certain there was another game in which he could not lose. As for the stud game, Nero Jones came out of his shell. He picked up McCord's battle offer and began to fight.

It was cool and deadly poker McCord saw then. Impatient and angry as he was, his own play lost its edge. When he had cards, Jones dropped out. When he tried to bull a mediocre holding, Jones caught and punished him. He was savagely eager to trap the gambler in another bluff. But he couldn't, and the failure cost him money.

Twice McCord got up and went to the bartender for more cash. The stubble-faced saloonman supplied it the first time with reluctance; the second time he shook his head violently. McCord spoke low and hard, and got what he wanted.

The room was tomblike as the last of it dribbled in front of him. Stale tobacco smoke hung in a thick blanket over the table. Miners ringed the players three deep, intently watching a brand of poker often heard about but seldom seen. Tension built up like something palpable in that silence. There was an expulsion of breath like the rush of wind in a canyon when Hart McCord pushed the last of his money to the center of the table.

"Two pair," he said hoarsely. "Aces and sevens."

Nero Jones said nothing. He turned over his hole card which was a king.

"Three kings," someone muttered. "The gambler takes it."

Jones raked in the pot. He would have stood up, but Hart McCord's voice stopped him.

"Gambler," he said, "just how crooked was this game?" He had moved back enough so that his gun could come up easily over the edge of the table. Nero Jones understood the move; the ring of miners understood it.

"You were watching it," Nero said steadily. "So were the rest of 'em."

The core of bitter anger was still within McCord; coupled with it now was a wolfish expectancy. "Maybe the rest of 'em," he said "don't know who they were gamblin' with."

Nero Jones was silent, his lean face like rock.

Very carefully, with his left hand, Hart McCord reached into his coat pocket and drew out a crumpled sheaf of papers. He spread them out over cards and chips on the table top.

"Nero the Great," he said. The fierce mockery in his tone whipped up an answer in Nero Jones' black eyes, but it was an answer of hurt.

McCord jerked a thumb at the papers. "I picked those up in Lewiston."

"Stole them," said Nero Jones.

McCord shrugged indifferently, nodded at the papers.

They were gaudy theatrical handbills, a dozen or more of them, with words in big type sprawled over them.

Necks craned. Bearded lips framed the unfamiliar phrases: "Baffling and Mysterious Feats of Prestidigitation; World's Premier Illusionist; Gigantic Marvels of Magic." And the name in big type, in red and orange and black—Nero the Great.

* * *

TO NERO JONES, gold camp gambler, that name meant the smell of grease paint, the dazzle of footlights, an endless sea of faces thundering applause—all of that plus a great skill that was no longer his.

McCord laughed harshly. "I'm sayin' he'd make only one kind of a gambler—a crooked tinhorn!"

McCord waited, his eyes wickedly narrow. He was stirring Nero Jones as a man might stir a sleepy snake with a stick; and the room was watching for the angered uncoiling. No men were standing now behind McCord.

Nero Jones didn't move.

"Maybe," McCord said, "he's still yellow. When he took me in Lewiston I went to the trouble of checkin' back on him, by wire. One of his tricks went wrong, an' he killed a man. Accident, they said. Maybe it was an' maybe it wasn't. The man he killed was Dan Shale, the Dutchman's brother."

Nero was looking at McCord, but he wasn't seeing him. He was remembering that black night when Dan Shale, broke and desperate, had put a gun in his ribs while he had been on the way to the theatre.

The gun had been cocked, but before Dan Shale could drop the hammer the gun had been whipped out of his hand. Nero Jones had fed the miner from Idaho, had taken him along to the theatre, intrigued by the fabulous stories of the gold camps. A job as helper came next. They had become fast friends.

There would have been no "River of Gold" illusion—which some of the handbills mentioned—had it not been for Dan Shale. Dan Shale inspired it; Nero the Great created it. And the Eastern states, wild for anything at all akin to Western gold, had poured into theatres to watch it. Until the night of the accident.

There was only bleak emptiness in the depths of Nero Jones' black eyes. The fault was his or Dan's—no one could say for certain. The slip had been made—Dan Shale had died, his chest crushed.

"So this Nero the Great killed a man and lost his nerve," Hart McCord was sneering. "He quit his crooked magic game and pulled out."

All the room was looking at him, Nero Jones knew, and reading in his face that this was true.

"He was a gutless pup," snarled McCord, leaning across the table. "He quit when the chips were down. He killed a man and his backbone turned into tallow! Well, he came to the wrong country. They called him back there, and I'm callin' him here!"

Nero Jones' face had turned very white. McCord was sure of himself, very sure. He was gambling now on the man he faced, gambling that his nerve was gone,

that he could be overawed, beaten down and whipped in a gun-fight.

McCord rasped, "You're a crooked tinhorn, Jones. Make your move!"

Nero Jones moved his hands slowly in a gesture no man in the room could mistake. He put them both palm down on the table top.

Somewhere in the crowd a held breath was expelled. Another man laughed. It was the laugh that drove home the stamp of cowardice.

Face hard with fury, Hart McCord kicked away his chair. "Draw, tinhorn!"

"Hold it, McCord!"

That was Keg Elfinstone still in his tilted chair. But now the rifle was resting solidly against his shoulder, pointed at Hart McCord's big chest.

McCord crouched a little, his voice tight. "You askin' for trouble, too, Elfinstone?"

"I don't have to ask for it. It keeps huntin' me up."

"Stay out of this and you'll stay out of trouble."

"I reckon I can't." Elfinstone spat in contemptuous disgust over the rifle bolt. "That gambler an' me come in here partners. We stay partners till he gets out."

"He ain't gettin' out."

"Yes, he is. He may be yellow, but he ain't crooked. Likely some of the rest of you noticed he never bet a hand that he'd dealt. He played your game, McCord, an' skinned you at it."

McCord was breathing hard. He was set and ready and weighing his chances.

"Don't try it," advised Elfinstone. "You know I can shoot. Gambler, pick up yore marbles an' clear out. Do it fast. This gun is gittin' heavy."

Nero Jones lifted his glance to his erstwhile partner. If it was gratitude he intended to convey, he met a blunt rejection.

"Go on," Keg Elfinstone said. "I'm in a worse spot now than when I met you. If I see you again I'll scatter your tail feathers with a .30-30 slug before you can open your trap."

CHAPTER FOUR

Death and the Dutchman

NERO JONES stripped off coat and vest, put the coat back on, and heaped his winnings on the vest which he gathered up at the corners. At a rough guess, he had close to ten thousand dollars. He left a sack of dust on the table to cover the chips which Spade Malone and the drunken miner still had.

Men fell back in front of him. He went to the bar, put down there the house's ten per cent—which was considerably less than Hart McCord had wrung out of the bartender.

He walked to the door with his chin up, slim and straight, his lean jaw like iron. He went through it, and closed it carefully.

The flash of lamplight through the opened door had been brief but not too brief to warn him of what was waiting out there in the darkness. It was still snowing slightly—a thin mist of flakes fluttering out of the black sky—and there was enough on the ground to show tracks.

Someone had left the saloon not more than a minute or two before.

Nero Jones' stifled lethargy was gone. He moved like a cat along the front of the building to the left. He had reached the corner when a gun's roar hammered

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flatly out of the darkness. The lead chipped into the notched logs at Nero Jones' elbow. He ducked and sprinted down the length of the building. Twice more gun explosions rocked against the cliff at his back. The last one was still echoing when he tripped and went sprawling to his knees in icy cold water.

It was the river which churned along the shelf, lapping almost at the rear foundations of the Dutchman's saloon.

For an instant Nero Jones fought against the current which sought to tug him off into deeper water. He got his balance, stood stock still. Though it seemed minutes that he waited, it could have been only seconds. The saloon's front door slammed open. There was a turmoil of boots pouring out.

In the pitch blackness Nero Jones began to move upstream, holding to the bank, groping his way along the water-washed rocks.

He heard Hart McCord shouting angrily. And a voice answered, "Must have knocked him into the river."

Nero Jones grinned without moving his lips. That voice belonged to the dark little man with the broken nose. It was he, then, who had slipped out to lay an ambush.

Someone was bawling for a lantern. The bartender croaked, "Knocked him into the river? You fool, he had ten thousand dollars on him!"

There was noise enough so Nero Jones could keep moving. The cold of the water struck to the bone, but to climb out would be to betray himself. Presently there was the glow of a pair of lanterns on the bank below him, and their sheen was flung out across the rippled black surface of the stream.

McCord roared, "If he ain't drowned he went upstream or down. Scatter and find out. Water's too cold for him to stay in it. The snow'll show where he climbed out."

One of the lanterns dropped out of sight. The other came bobbing upstream through the thin veil of flakes. Nero Jones went flat on his belly under an overhanging rock. The frigid stream flooded against his chest, numbing him.

The man with the lantern passed along the bank above him. Who it was Jones couldn't tell. Spade Malone, he guessed.

Down by the saloon the bartender was still whining over the money which had gone into the river with Nero Jones. Hart McCord cursed him. "Shut up, you fool! It's worth that to have him dead."

Presently the lantern went swinging back to the group by the saloon. The other returned from downstream, also reporting failure. There was a brief conference which Nero Jones couldn't catch. Then the men went stamping back into the saloon.

Nero Jones pulled himself out of the water, and lay on the bank as long as he dared. When he was afraid he would no longer be able to stand at all, he climbed to his feet, stamped the circulation back into his legs and beat his arms around his body. The temperature was still above freezing, but close to it, and dropping. He knew there was a better than good chance that he would be a dead man before daylight.

He went back deliberately toward the saloon, and was halfway to it when a shaft of light came from the opened front door.

McCord and Spade Malone stepped outside, and the light vanished. Someone had brought up horses. The breath was whooshing in their nostrils and they were stamping against the cold. Saddle leather strained. Hoofs clumped in the snow.

Twenty yards away Nero Jones could make out the dim shapes of three riders as they passed him. Another moment and they were lost in the darkness and flickering snow.

Nero Jones went grimly to the tracks and stood in them, looking down. If his

gamble was right, he had to follow those tracks.

* * *

HE WHO had balanced so many chances in his life understood what a mad gamble that would be. How far they were going he didn't know. If he followed, it would have to be on foot, for in a saddle, soaked through, he would freeze. Let the snow thicken, and the trail would be blotted out.

Under his eyes the snow dropped, flake by flake, into the hoof prints. And in the throat of Nero Jones—who had been robbed of his nerve by a friend's death—rose something like a sob.

Head down, he began to tramp along that triple line of tracks.

The trail swung away from the Dutchman's ledge, began to climb abruptly through timber. Nero Jones drove his feet hard against the ground to keep the creeping numbness out of them. Now and again he swung his arms, slapping them against his ribs. In continued movement, he knew, lay his only hope of survival. If he came to the end of his energy before he came to the end of the trail, he was finished.

There were times when he had to scramble almost on all fours. He could see where the horses ahead of him had slipped and buck-jumped. When there was a level stretch, he dog-trotted.

But the dog-trot became more and more leaden. Nero Jones' lungs were beginning to burn. The particles of snow were no longer soft; they had hardened into icy pellets. There had been no wind; now a breeze was beginning to drone through the darkness; boughs bent with it, crusts of snow plummeting from the branches. The air was freezing, and so was Nero Jones.

Panic caught him and he stopped. There was the rustle of the hard snow falling, the whistle of wind in a rocky canyon. His impulse was to turn and run blindly back the way he had come. He fought that. It was too late.

He went blundering on, staggering a little. He had a harder time following the tracks. They were filling in, the depressions becoming rounded blots which soon would be entirely obscured.

Grimly he forced his buckling legs. Hurry! He must hurry! But hurry to what? He was very nearly helpless now.

Nero Jones almost missed the sound behind him. It wasn't wind or snow but the movement of a horse's hoofs. He staggered to one side, groping for the shelter of a stunted thicket.

Crouching there, he watched the faint shape of a rider go past him and vanish among the trees. Nero Jones licked his cracking lips. That made the odds four to one.

It was easier, though, to follow the fresh tracks. Nero Jones kept his bloodshot eyes fastened on them. He was afraid that if he didn't he would wander away and lose them forever. He was hurrying more now, or thought he was. And he decided that it must be getting warmer. There was no longer that chill knifing up from his feet. He must keep his hands warm and supple, of course, if he was to use his gun.

He rubbed his hands, and knocked them together. They were quite normal, it seemed. The cold was gone.

A dim warning broke through the fog of his thoughts. His hands weren't normal. They were freezing. He rubbed at them furiously, beat them against his legs. There was a deep satisfaction in the tingling pain which ran up from his fingers.

He looked down at the ground. The tracks were gone. He had lost them. He stopped dead still, and the bottom seemed to fall out of his stomach.

He began to walk in a small circle.

His eyes were down, but something strove to lift them. He submitted to that desire, staring stupidly at a small ruby glow which seemed to hang in the trees over his head. It was a ball of rosy light that flickered and danced as the snow plunged down through it.

It took time for the meaning to soak in. That light was thrown against the snow from the open mouth of a stovepipe. A stovepipe meant a cabin.

He turned and stumbled toward it, fumbling with numbed fingers for the gun in his holster.

A voice almost at his elbow rasped, "Hold it, mister! Right where you are!"

Nero Jones didn't stop. He had to get to that cabin. He scarcely felt the clubbing blow which slid off the side of his head and struck him on the left shoulder. It knocked him down, but didn't deprive him of his senses.

He lay quite still, nevertheless. Some one knelt by him, and grunted as he swung him up over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

* * *

NERO Jones tried to reach his gun, but the gun was blocked and his fingers were too stiff. His captor took a dozen staggering steps through the snow, stopped and kicked at a door.

When it opened a wave of heat so intense that it was painful broke against the back of Nero Jones' legs.

He was carried inside and dropped on the floor. Someone stooped over him instantly and jerked the sixgun from his holster. He recognized the dark, deeply-grooved face of Spade Malone.

Malone said, "You've got nine lives, gambler, but this is the last of 'em."

Broken-Nose stood in the doorway, panting.

From across the room came Hart McCord's growl: "Close that door an' get back out there. Might be more behind him."

Broken-Nose went outside again. Nero Jones rolled over and sat up.

Malone's face was sardonic. "Take a good look, gambler—if this is what you been huntin'. You'll never see anything else." He had only one good hand. In it were some lengths of rawhide and Nero Jones' gun. He dropped the gun on the table, moved with the rawhide to the other corner of the cabin.

It was Keg Elfinstone he had been binding. The job was only half done. Elfinstone was lying on his belly; one loop had been drawn around his wrists, which were behind him, but it was not yet securely knotted. Elfinstone's long face was morose. He looked at Nero Jones and had nothing to say.

Nero Jones was thinking of that gun on the table, but he didn't let his eyes rest on it. He got slowly and awkwardly to his feet.

Hart McCord snapped, "Spade, you fool, keep that gambler covered! He's tricky, I tell you!"

Malone grumbled an answer, drew his own gun and backed into the corner. It wasn't till then that Nero Jones got a good look at Hart McCord, and at the Dutchman. It wasn't until then that he understood the bright heat which brought out sweat from every pore of his body and made the pain of returning circulation flame through his hands.

At the back of the cabin, fire roared in a red-hot stove. The Dutchman was through sweating. The skin of his once-plump face had fallen back against the bones; it was dry and cracked, like fire-browned paper.

The Dutchman's hands were tied behind him. A logging chain had been looped around his waist and secured with wire. The ends of the chain had been spiked to the logs which formed the angle of the corner. The Dutchman could move

forward and back, but not far enough forward to reach the water.

There was a lot of it—the water—where he could see it. On the floor in front of him were two full tin cups, a brimming wash basin, and a scattering of tin cans into which water had been poured. All of the articles had been filled wastefully; the floor around them was stained and wet. Hart McCord was down on one knee in front of the Dutchman.

He was pouring water idly from one tin can into another, and back.

Each time, at the gurgling sound of the little cascade, the Dutchman's swollen tongue rubbed against his lips. The sight of his eyes, watching that water, put a sick knot in Nero Jones' stomach. They were ragged, burning pits in the sunken mask of his face.

"Look, Dutch," McCord was saying softly, "this water's yours. It's cold. It's melted snow. Cold water in your throat, Dutch. You'd like that. That would take the fire out of it. All you have to do is talk, Dutch. Just talk."

The Dutchman wanted to close his burning eyes, but he couldn't, not while he was seeing and hearing that water.

"Another week of this, Dutch, and you'll kill yourself," McCord said. "It's a hard way to die when you can have all the water you want, just askin' for it. All I want is half of your gold, Dutch. Only half. You haven't got any other chance."

The Dutchman touched his lips with his tongue. He croaked, "Dan's comin'."

"I told you he was dead," McCord said. "He can't come."

The Dutchman waited a long time, staring at the water. It was clear that he didn't believe McCord. He didn't say any more.

McCord cursed him and got to his feet. He had stripped down to his shirt sleeves, but his face was dripping perspiration and his shirt was wet. He looked at Nero Jones, lifted his gun from its holster and balanced it on the palm of his hand.

"Gambler," he said, "I'll take that money now."

Nero Jones smiled. The heat had done him good, but how much it had done for his slender fingers he couldn't be sure.

"Why, McCord, I haven't got it," he said. "You may have to spend a little time working me over. Like him." He nodded at the Dutchman.

"I won't bother." McCord lifted the gun in his fist, cocked it.

"Wait a minute." Nero Jones put both hands up shoulder high. "There's something I want to show you first." He made a little plucking motion in the air, and one of the silver penknives was in his fingers. A flick of his wrist and it was spinning, blades open.

In McCord's eyes was the intention to shoot. Something held his thumb on the hammer—curiosity, perhaps, or a peculiar sing-song quality in Nero Jones' voice, or simply indifferent contempt.

"Keep your gun on me, man! If you're worried. I can't throw this penknife before you can drop that hammer. Not even Nero the Great could!" Nero Jones chuckled. His wrist was limbering. "But look at it this way. This knife could have been a gun. Or ten thousand dollars. Out of thin air, McCord." There were two penknives now. He was juggling them fast, so that they made a whirling silver column. "Ever seen the Indian Rope Trick, McCord? A boy climbs a rope and doesn't come down. Just disappears. Vanishes. Like this." One of the silver penknives went up, and didn't come down. "Gone, you see. Like the boy. Maybe when it comes down, if it comes down, it will be that money you're looking for. All right, now the other one. If I can. Up it goes—"

Even the Dutchman's eyes rose with that whirling bit of silver.

Hart McCord's came down first, and his gun slammed out an angry shot.

THE bullet went over Nero Jones' head because Nero Jones was diving for the table. He did it all in one smoothly blended move—went past the table, snatched up the gun there, and landed, shooting, on his back on the floor.

There were two bullets in Hart McCord's chest when he shook out his second slug which drove splinters into Jones' cheek. It took two more to drop him in a sprawl across the pans of water he had used to torture the Dutchman.

Nero Jones rolled over. There was a gun blasting at his back but it was missing because Keg Elfinstone, wrenching loose his hands, was rolling against Spade Malone's legs.

Nero Jones' last bullet hit Malone in the throat.

Hastily, Keg Elfinstone reared up on his feet. "Behind you!" he roared. He was trying to get a grip on Malone's revolver which was slippery with blood.

Nero Jones turned his gun, though he knew it was empty. Broken-Nose stood in the doorway. Nero Jones saw the spout of flame from his weapon, felt a wrenching shock as the bullet scraped bone on his left side.

Another shot might have finished him, but it didn't come. Keg Elfinstone was lunging toward the door, roaring; he had got Malone's gun to working.

Nero Jones climbed painfully to his feet, holding his side. There was blood, but no broken bones. One of the cups of water was unspilled. He picked it up and held it to the Dutchman's lips.

Elfinstone, strolling back from the door which he had left open, growled, "Easy, boy. Easy. You'll kill yourself."

They were two hours getting the Dutchman to a point where he could talk. He had eaten nothing and tasted no water for six days.

The story he told before he fell asleep was meager, but it was enough. He had known what was coming. He had written to Dan. Then one night Hart McCord and his gunmen had broken into his saloon. He, the Dutchman, had refused to tell them anything, and they had carried him to this cabin in the mountains to torture it out of him.

Elfinstone nodded. "That barkeep took over an' spread the story that you'd sold out to him. Some folks believed it. The rest of 'em was afraid to tangle with McCord."

They rolled the Dutchman into a bunk. The tale Nero Jones had to tell him could wait.

Nero Jones was smiling. "As far as tangling with McCord goes," he asked, "how'd you happen to wander up this way, Keg?"

Elfinstone's long face flushed. "I kind of got to thinkin' that I'd made a wrong guess, there in the saloon."

"How'd you get out? You'd asked McCord for trouble."

"Easy. When they spraddled out after you, I pulled my freight. I had a notion what you'd been up to, though, so I hung around, waitin' to trail McCord. Halfway up I saw your footprints. I thought they had you in the cabin here along with the Dutchman, so I—"

"Barged on in," finished Jones, "and they nailed you."

"Me an' my luck," said Elfinstone morosely. "It couldn't have come out no other way."

Nero Jones got a chair, stood on it, and picked out the two silver penknives which were stuck in one of the ceiling beams. Even Keg Elfinstone, who watched very closely, didn't see what he did with them, but they weren't in his hand when he climbed down.

"Judgin' from the way you got hold of that gun an' used it," said Elfinstone, "I got a hunch it was lucky for McCord he didn't try to pull on you in that poker game."

"Dan Shale taught me about as much as

I taught him," Nero Jones admitted. "Only it was lucky for us. If I'd shot McCord, we might never have found Dutch. I had to break McCord so he'd make another try for Dutch's money, but I didn't want to kill him."

Keg Elfinstone was looking shrewdly at his partner. "I kind of think I'd have wanted to. He done some pretty loud talkin' about nerve, an' such."

"He didn't say anything that wasn't true."

Elfinstone shrugged. "Maybe it was true once. If I'm any judge, it ain't true now. You goin' back East or stayin' here?"

Nero Jones was thinking of a lot—of what he had had once, and what he had now. "Hell, Keg," he said "a man can't run out on his partner, can he?"

Keg Elfinstone wanted to grin, but he didn't. "Run out, son? When there's ten thousand dollars to be split?"

"Keg, this is hard to believe, but I lost that money. When I stumbled into that river, the vest I had it wrapped in jumped out of my hand. It's to hell and gone down river by now."

"Can you figger any way to make that seem like a real piece of good luck?"

"No," Nero Jones admitted reluctantly, "I can't."

"Glad to hear it!" This time Keg Elfinstone grinned widely. "That's me doin' that," he said. "That's me bringin' yore luck down level."

THE END

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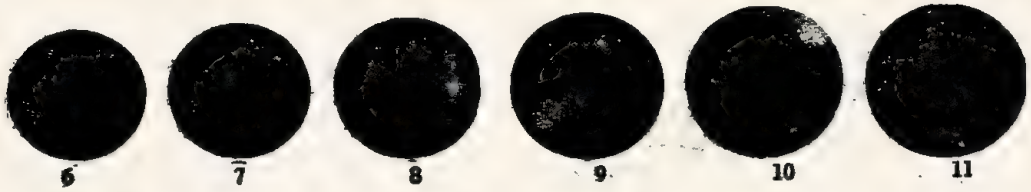

• • Blood-Barrier For

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In a movement of tired resignation, Nancy Randolph nodded her shapely sunbonneted head. "Today or any other day, I guess, Jim." Then she reached behind her to their dwindling stock of provisions.

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"We've still got some jerked venison," she told him, "but there won't be enough flour to last three more stops—and the others haven't a bit more than we have."

Jim Randolph had to force the grin he turned on her, "We'll be all right, so long as we still got some extry notches in our belts!" Then with a sudden seriousness as he observed how thin she had become these last few days: "Don't worry, Nan. There'd oughta be some game up ahead, once we git out of this Humbolt Sink."

He didn't wait for her to answer him, but stepped down from the seat and walked back to the second wagon. He regarded the driver, a reedy youth still in his 'teens, with a slight hesitancy.

"Thought we might as well stop here, Martin," he said to him. "At least there's a little graze for the oxen up there on that hill."

The youngster spoke bitterly. "A little graze is right!" he said scornfully. "Just enough to make their bellies swell up with the grit, and give 'em the gravel worse'n they got it now!"

Jim Randolph ignored this. He asked quietly: "How's Ilda?"

Martin Jones threw back a worried look into the wagon. "How'd you expect her to be?" he answered sullenly. "Jouncin' around in the back of a covered wagon isn't any way for a girl to be gettin' over the cholera. And now, with hardly enough grub for a flea to live on . . . " He let his voice die hopelessly.

Jim Randolph slowly dropped his hand down from the wagon seat. "Well, it's no good to set there and mope about it," he said. "I'm goin' back and tell the others we'll make camp here," he said. "Nancy'll be over in a minute to help out with Ilda."

A short time later, with the oxen turned out to graze and the white-hooded wagons pulled up to form a protective ring around the cook fires, the little company sat down to their slender rations of jerked meat and sourdough biscuits. They ate in a heavy silence, but in spite of the evident sharpness of their hunger they chewed slowly, as if in hope of extracting extra nourishment from the food that way. Once, when the only children of the party, Cassie and Johnny Cantwell, started to chase each other around the fires, their father, Tom Cantwell, sternly called a stop to their play.

"Come back here and set down with yore maw and me," he ordered. "You wanta run the taller clear off'n yore skinny little hides?"

No one apparently noticed the rider until he was almost into the camp, and then Jim Randolph rose suddenly and stood waiting for him to come up.

* * *

THE man had a thick black beard and wore a pair of dark blue jeans tucked down into long miners' boots. The saddlebag of his paint horse showed a fat bulge, and when he spoke his voice was hoarse, as though the dust of the trail still clogged it.

"I'm lookin' fur the Randolph party," the man said. "Feller by the name of Martin Jones."

Martin stepped up, a faint trace of swagger in the movement. "I'm Jones," he said. "What's wanted of me?"

The rider eyed him impassively a moment, then dipped into his saddlebag and took out a travel-stained envelope. "Letter here fur yuh," he announced laconically. "Lucky to find yuh, bub," and as he handed it over he clucked casually to his horse.

"Just a minute!" Jim Randolph protested. "Ain't you gonna light down, an—"

"Ain't got time," the man snapped. "Gotta git on to Laramie with the rest o' this mail. Brung 'er in from the diggin's."

"The diggin's!" Jim Randolph swung

a sudden searching glance upon Martin Jones, who had the letter open and was reading it with a queer, strained attention.

Jim suddenly took the messenger's horse by the bridle and pulled it a little away from the group gathered around the cook fires. "How're conditions up ahead?" he asked the man in a low voice. "I don't wanta scare the others, but we're gettin' pretty short on grub, and—"

The rider shook his head ominously. "Things is bad," he said. "Wuss, the farther along yuh git. A piece on from here the hull o' Humboldt Valley's under water. That's one place where yuh'll have t' take it thirty mile across the mountains."

"What's that!" Martin Jones had stopped reading. "Are you trying to tell us things are *worse* farther on?"

"Ain't tryin'," the rider said imperturbably; "I'm tellin' yuh. And as fur game," he looked back at Jim Randolph, "mister, that's scarce'n an Injun dog without fleas."

Jim Randolph said: "We'll get through. We've *got* to get through."

"Well, hope yuh make it, pardner." The man on the horse gathered up his reins. "But I know what I'm talkin' about. Other end o' this Sink, I seen a hull slew o' wagons stranded. Mules an' oxen played out 'r dead, and the people jest a-settin' there an' starvin'. Up t' Marysville and Sacramenty City they're talkin' of sending out relief parties, but so fur 'tain't nawthin' *but* talk. They's a chance some traders may git through though—if the snow don't fly fust. And if folks kin whack up the two dollars and a half a pound they charge fur flour an' salt pork."

There was a heavy moment of silence when he had gone. Jim Randolph gazed after him with a thoughtful stare, and Martin Jones with an angry look of worry.

At length Jim turned and nodded towards the letter. "Bad news, Martin?"

"Have we ever had any good since we joined up with this blasted wagon train of yours?" Martin sullenly handed him the letter. "Here, read it yourself if you're so interested."

With a quiet forbearance Jim Randolph took it and bent his gaze to its cramped, slanting script. He read:

My Dear Children:

I am sending this by one of the miners who has been paid to ride to Laramie with letters from men here at the diggings, and I can only pray that it may reach you somewhere along the trail.

Since writing to you before, advising that you join a train and start for California, nothing has happened to change my mind about this claim. In the last two weeks alone I have taken out more than ten thousand dollars' worth of gold, and so far it seems as if I have hardly scratched the surface.

But my real reason in writing you is to send with this note properly witnessed papers which transfer the title in my claim to you children.

I don't know if I mentioned it to you before, but when I first arrived out here I took a partner—a man who unfortunately proved unworthy of my trust. After I had discovered these diggings, my partner went off on a spree, leaving me to handle alone all the responsibility and work of the claim. I tried to sober him and get him to come back and go to work, as there is a miners' law out here which requires all new claims to be worked within a period of ten days, in order to establish ownership.

I had been ill with a fever and was too weak to work the claim alone, but when the tenth day came and I could not locate my partner, I had to hire a man and start working the diggings pronto to prevent loss of my title.

Later on my partner came back and demanded half-interest in the mine. However, when the case went before a miners' jury they ruled that my former associate had forfeited all rights in the claim and that it now belonged solely to me. In spite of the obvious justice of this decision, my erstwhile partner left camp mumbling threats. While I have no real fears, I thought it wisest under the circumstances to see that title to the mine is vested clearly in your names.

Your Uncle Jericho is with me at present,

having recently brought a train in from Kearney, but he is leaving shortly and will try and meet you on the trail and guide you here in safety.

We are situated not many miles from Stringtown, and my claim is on a bar in the middle fork of the Feather River, about four miles below Nelson's Creek.

God bless you and keep you, children, and may He speed you to me safely.

As ever, your loving father,

Adam Jones.

* * *

JIM RANDOLPH didn't immediately speak when he had finished reading the letter. He refolded it slowly before handing it back to Martin. He said finally: "I wouldn't worry none, Martin, if I was you. Your paw's had a lot on his mind, but he probably ain't got no call to be fussed up."

"Pa doesn't get fussed up without a reason!" Martin spoke with an angry vehemence. "He'd never have sent us this deed to the mine if he wasn't in danger —real danger!"

"Well, they got vigilantes organized up there now," Jim said. "I don't guess they'd let anything happen to your—"

"Vigilantes!" Martin spat out the word. "Miners trying to act as peace officers! Like as not a bunch of hog-callers and trail riffraff!" He waved his arm angrily over the camp. "And look at the way things are with us! Still three hundred miles from the diggings, and ahead of us Indians and mountains and starvation! Why didn't you tell us it would be like this when you took our money for the trip back at Independence? Why didn't you use some of that money to buy enough supplies, so we wouldn't all starve to death!"

Jim Randolph flushed. "I told you before, I didn't dare overload the wagons. If I had—"

He stopped suddenly. The back-flap of the nearest wagon had been drawn back and a girl stood there, pale and slender in a figure-molding linsey-woolsey dress. Her flat-brushed hair was parted severely in the middle, and was a rich shiny black in contrast to the startling pallor of her face.

"Ilda!" Jim Randolph protested. "Ilda, you shouldn't be up! You're not strong enough to—"

"I'm all right, Jim." Ilda Jones' voice sounded tired, but her glance crossing to her brother was firm and unwavering. "I heard what you just said to Jim, Martin," she reproached him. "I think you'd ought to apologize."

"Apologize!" Martin laughed flatly. "I never apologize for what I mean!"

Jim said, "It's all right, Ilda; Martin's just upset. He'll he all right, soon as he's cooled down."

"Oh, I will, will I?" With a sudden fury, Martin ran his glance over the set, serious faces of the men about the campfires. "Well, hasn't a one of you got a mind of his own. Do you all have to sit there like a lot of dummies and let Randolph do whatever he pleases with this train?"

Big Tom Cantwell spoke. "Reckon that's right, bub," he answered quietly. "Jim's captain; what he says goes!"

Dave Hasbrouck, tall, bone-seasoned, nodded assent. "Can't have too many bosses," he agreed. "Way to do is have one leader you kin trust, and then stand by him."

"That's right," echoed Harvey Jebb. Jebb was a short, thickset man, grayed at the temples, but with youthful, ruddy cheeks. "And 'tain't sense to stand there augerin' about it, Martin; you know that."

Martin bared, "You're a fine one to talk! Is it sense to go on like this, when we've got barely enough food to last two more days? Is it sense to go on with women and children, when you don't know where your next meal's coming from? He spun around, tensely facing his

sister. "Ilda, you and I are getting out of this! First decent-sized train comes along, we're joining it!"

There was a moment's tight silence before Ilda Jones spoke. Then she said: "I guess you're forgetting, Martin. This is almost the first of November. We're not likely to meet any new trains this late in the season."

Martin eyed her bitterly. "Don't worry, there'll be trains," he declared. "And then if the rest would rather stick here with Jim Randolph and starve to death, why let 'em!"

Ilda spoke quietly from the back of the wagon. "You don't mean that, Martin."

"I do mean it! Every word of it!"

Ilda Jones stood poised behind the high tailboard of the wagon. Thin, wasted by the cholera that had nearly ended her hope of a new life before it could begin, she somehow seemed a symbol for this little company of adventuring men and women—a symbol of the indomitable spirit that made them all pioneers, and would bid them to go on, despite everything.

At last she spoke again. "I'm sorry you feel that way about it, Martin. Because no matter what *you* do, I'm staying here."

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CHAPTER TWO

Strangers from Hell

NOW, two days later, those calm words of faith spoken by Ilda Jones were a bitter mockery in Jim Randolph's thoughts as he and his sister approached the end of another wearying day of travel on the high front seat of their Conestoga. What had happened at camp the night before had left its impress upon his mind, raw and burningly unforgettable. It seemed that every screech of the wagon wheels echoed little Cassie Cantwell's terrible piercing scream, and then the moment's awful after-silence, when they had all remained hunkered around the five, momentarily petrified.

Mrs. Cantwell's gasped-out cry, "Cassie!" had been the first voicing of the unspoken fear of them all; and then Tom Cantwell was on his feet and running back to the creek where they had sent the child for a pail of water.

She lay with her long wheat-colored hair, floating like seaweed in the muddied stream, the tufted shaft of the arrow sticking up cruelly from the shallow cup of her back.

Tom Cantwell had carried her back with her spindly little legs swinging down from the cradle of his arms, and had lain her down in front of the fire as gently as if she had been alive.

"The murderin' skunks!" he said in a slow, terrible voice.

Sara Cantwell looked up at him with the blank, fixed stare of a woman in a trance; it seemed an unending moment before awareness rushed on her. And then, as sympathetic hands sought vainly to restrain her, she plunged forward upon the unresponding little body, hugging it to her breasts with fierce racking sobs. . . .

A sharp cry from Nancy awoke Jim from his engrossment. "Jim, look—up ahead there in the mist!" Nancy's tone had a compelling excitement as she half rose from the jouncing wagon seat and pointed tensely towards the outlet of the far-reaching canyon through which the train was winding. "Jim, look—please!

I'm almost certain that I saw a rider!"

Jim Randolph's glance half-heartedly followed her pointing finger. Then he shook his head. "Another mirage, Nan. You've been seein' 'em all afternoon."

The girl murmured, "I was sure it was something this time," but her tone now lacked conviction and she dropped back with a sigh to the seat. "I guess I was just painting another wish-picture," she finished wistfully.

Jim Randolph turned and tilted her chin on the tips of his fingers. "You're a good soldier, skinnymalinks. So's Ilda."

Nancy said, "I know Illy tries not to show it, but she's terribly worried about that letter from her father, Jim. Has she said anything more to you about it?"

Jim nodded. "Talks of makin' us all shareholders in the mine, now that she and Martin owns it. Says if we git through to the diggin's, it'll be because of us all pullin' together."

"Do you think we *are* going to get through, Jim?"

"Why of course we're gonna git through! What makes you imagine—"

"You don't have to lie to me, Jim."

He looked down into her quiet brown eyes, at her thin, hunger-pinched face. "We'll git through," he said positively. "Jericho Jones is on his way out to meet us, don't forgit that. And there's no better scout along the wagon trails than Jericho Jones."

"That may be true. But Jericho Jones can't keep us from starving if we don't soon find some decent food."

"You remember what that messenger from the mines told us about traders?" Jim reminded her. "Heck, we'll likely be meetin' up with one of their wagons any day now."

Nancy impulsively put out her hand to him. "I hope so, Jim. I hope so, especially for yours and Ilda's sake. "

"Now what in thunder makes you think that—?"

Nancy smiled cryptically. "You can't fool a woman about such things, Jim." And then falling suddenly silent her gaze ran out ahead again into the graying distance.

Jim's momentary irritation at her woman's knowingness quickly faded before the more compelling thought of their need of food. Nancy was wasting away to a shadow; he could notice the change in her from just these last two days. Days of hell for every one of them; burning daylight hours, freezing nights. Desperate hunts for game and for halfway decent graze for the footsore, flat-bellied oxen.

He thought of their noon's repast of stew—stew made of brown ground squirrels and a single stringy sage hen that Harvey Jebb had been lucky enough to bring in. The last of their jerky had gone yesterday, along with the sack of biscuits they had been hoarding against a final emergency. Martin Jones had triumphantly found those by tracing their odor to the wagon of Dave Hasbrouck. They were a mass of green mold, ruined by wetting from the last river crossing the train had made.

Martin had held up the dripping sack before the others, looking at Jim Randolph. "This is the way your train captain protects our food," he had sneered. "And you saw last night how he protects the children of our party!"

Tom Cantwell had hit him then and immediately afterward apologized. "I shouldn't have done that," he said. "I should've waited till you were grown up enough to have a man's brain in your head."

All these things, Jim Randolph reflected, were bad; the desperate daily hunts for game, Martin Jones' insistent trouble-making, and the unceasing vigilance that now had to be maintained against the skulking Digger Indians that had begun to harass them at every opportunity. The Diggers attacked stealthily from ambush,

never openly. And their deadly arrows flashed as soundlessly as the one that had buried its brutal barb in the back of little Cassie Cantwell. . . .

* * *

GLANCING up from his musing, Jim felt Nancy's fingers tightly gripping his arm. "Jim, look! Riders! I did see them, after all!"

Jim stared at the three horsemen now plainly visible at the far end of the gorge. He kept the elation out of his voice. "Traders, most likely. Told yuh there'd be some along."

"You know you're excited, Jim. You just won't show it."

"All right," he grinned at her, "I'm excited. Glad for you too, Skinnymalinks," he added, stopping the oxen. "You ain't been makin' such very good ballast here on the front seat lately."

Dave Hasbrouck, and then Homer Jebb and Tom Cantwell came running up excitedly, and in a few moments everyone in the train was gathered in tense, expectant huddle in front of Jim Randolph's wagon.

"You reckon it's traders, Jim?" Dave Hasbrouck asked, squinting down the pass to where the three riders were now clearly silhouetted against the gray rump of the gorge.

"Wouldn't wonder. Can't be certain though." And like the rest Jim kept his gaze glued on the oncoming horsemen.

There was no more talk. The little crowd of starving, trail-exhausted men and women stood too breathlessly excited to speak, too tensely expectant to do anything but stare in happy anticipation at the now rapidly approaching riders.

Jim and Nancy Randolph stepped down from the seat of their wagon and now were with the others, waiting. The horsemen swung around a bend in the pass and came fully into view. And at that moment, Jim Randolph tensed.

Suppose they had all been deceiving themselves? These men might not be traders at all. Now that he thought about it, this would be a long ways out for traders to venture, at this time of the year. And there wasn't any wagon in sight, though of course that could be farther back, at the other end of the gorge. Still, there was a queer feeling of doubt in him, a sense of foreboding that he was unable to shake off.

The first rider, who was also apparently the leader, was almost up to them now, a beefy-faced, heavy-set man with his hat brim uptilted in front to show weaselly, glass-hard little black eyes. His heavy wampus shirt was tucked into fuzzy homespun jeans, and these, above his ankles, were laced up tightly into brown canvas leggings. A holstered sixgun was a conspicuous protuberance on his right hip.

The other two men were clad in buckskins, one tall and hawk-nosed, with the coarse black hair and coppery skin of an Indian; the other built more stockily, with faded, expressionless eyes and a deep scar furrowed through the red beard bristle of his right cheek.

As the foremost rider reined in, these two pulled up stolidly behind him, their narrowed eyes keenly sweeping the group gathered in front of Jim Randolph's wagon.

"Howdy," the man in the wampus shirt said. "You people in the market for a little grub?"

Homer Jebb blurted, "Mister, you hit the nail plumb on the head! We was hopin' you fellers was traders, because—"

"Wait a minute, Homer!" Jim Randolph's voice had a curt abruptness as he shouldered through the crowd at the wagon and faced the man sitting the horse. Then, "We might be able to use a few extry supplies," he said to the man. "Dependin' on what you're carryin', and how much yuh charge."

The horseman said, "I reckon if we're gonna do business I better introduce myself. Name's Curlett; Buck Curlett. These gents with me," and he nodded back over his shoulder towards the two men behind him, "are Pete Cordova and Red Fentriss."

"My name's Randolph," Jim said.

Curlett grunted an acknowledgement, for some reason looking disappointed. "well now, about this flour and pork we're tottin'," he said. "Where we had our wagon, back a piece, we've been gettin' three dollads and a half a pound fur our stuff." His bleak eyes narrowed shrewdly upon the starving, sunken-cheeked little band in front of the wagon. "Here I'd have to ask a little more," he said, "on account of the extry haul in."

"More!" Jim Randolph stared up at him angrily. "But man, we couldn't even pay your three and a half a pound! We've sunk all our cash in these wagons and oxen. We haven't got more'n fifty, sixty dollars among the lot of us!"

Cudlett's expression hardened. "That's too bad," he said coldly. "But I didn't bring a wagonload o' grub down over these mountains just for the fun of it."

Jim cried out, "But you don't want to trade on human suffering, do you? You could ask two dollars a pound and still be making a fat profit on your stuff! You can't—"

"Oh, yes I can, mister." Curlett's tone was frigid. "I can ask any price I please—and get it."

"Not from us you can't!" Jim Randolph spun and faced the wagon train company. "I'll leave it to you folks," he burst out hotly, "whether we give in to this bunch of trail-robbers or not!"

Homer Jebb pretended to sniff. "I smell skunk," he said, looking at Curlett. "And I think I know which way it's comin' from."

"I'll eat squirrel the rest of my life," exploded Tom Cantwell, "before I'll pay any three and a half a pound fur salt pork!"

"That goes for me too," said Dave Hasbrouck quietly. He turned to Jim Randolph. "I'll butcher my yoke of oxen, Jim; we can leave the wagon behind and the wife and I'll ride with the Jebbs. The ox meat'll be pretty stringy, I reckon, but leastways it'll be somethin' to chaw on."

Curlett sneered, "A pair of mangy oxen won't last yuh long—not on these trails. But if yuh'd rather starve than eat, it ain't none of my business."

Jim Randolph eyed him contemptuously. "Seein' as you admit it's our business," he said, "suppose you and your *compañeros* light a shuck out of here and start tendin' to yours."

* * *

WITH a calm deliberation, Curlett picked up his reins. "You'll be lookin' me up in a week's time," he predicted coolly. "But remember this: The price of my flour and pork'll be *six* dollars a pound then—if there should be any left." At that he started to swing his horse, but was stopped by a sharp cry from the back of the crowd.

"Wait!" Martin Jones had pushed his way forward and stood beside Curlett's horse, breathing tightly. "I'll buy some of that flour and pork! The rest can starve on ox gristle if they like, but I won't!"

Curlett paused; at the same instant Ilda Jones moved out of the crowd and seized her brother's arm. "Martin, you're making a fool of yourself again! You know we have no money to—"

"We own a gold mine, don't we?" Furiously Martin wrenched himself free. He flung his glance back at Curlett. "You won't have to worry about your money," he said boastfully. "You'll get it with interest, as soon as we get to the diggings."

"Is that so?" Curlett had stiffened, and now his eyes were on Martin Jones with sharp, sudden interest. "Maybe you don't savvy about California," he said. "Most of the claims out there ain't worth the labor of workin' 'em."

"Well this one is!" Martin flared. "Just ask anybody in the Feather River country about Adam Jones' claim!"

Buck Curlett straightened as if a ramrod had suddenly been pushed up his back. At the same moment, Red Fentriss's pale eyes betrayed a swift attention.

Curlett said, "Now that's a funny thing. I knew an Adam Jones when I was up in that territory. Had a claim on the middle fork of the Feather, 'bout four mile from Nelson's Creek."

"But then you must have known father! That's where his claim's located!" Ilda Jones had stepped forward again, and was tensely staring up at Curlett. "Was father all right when you left there?" she asked him. "Was he—in good health?"

"Sure; fine," Curlett responded quickly. "Only his claim was beginnin' to peter out considerable. Last I heard, he was spendin' more tryin' to make it go than he was takin' out of it."

"But dad wrote us that it was a bonanza!" blurted Martin. "He said—"

Curlett shrugged. "Your father had to buy a lot of expensive equipment, hopin' to hit pay dirt again, down lower. But it wasn't enough. Only chance for that claim now is to have a speculator come in and buy it—some hombre willin' to take a chance by buyin' a lot of new machinery and hirin' a big bunch of men to work it."

From behind, Red Fentriss said, "Why don't you take it off'n their hands, Buck? You was always talkin' of takin' a plunge on some worked-out mine. And we'd oughta've made enough out of our tradin' to buy up a played-out claim like this one of Jones's."

Curlett stroked his chin as if weighing the idea. "I *could* go back and have a parley with Jones," he conceded. "It'd be an idea."

"But you wouldn't have to do that!" interjeced Martin. "I own the claim now—or at least, my sister and I own it together."

"And," declared Ilda Jones emphatically, "we're not selling it!"

Curlett acted as if she hadn't spoken. He said to Martin: "Red's a minin' man. If he thinks there's a chance of salvage, I suppose I could offer yuh a couple thousand for it."

"And give 'em our half wagonload of supplies too, huh boss?" Fentriss threw in.

"Sure, that'd be all right I guess." Curlett looked at Martin. "You and your sister'd be better off," he told him. "You'd have a lot more security settin' up in some kind of business, than you would tryin' to operate a busted-down mine."

"Then why are you so interested in buyin' it, mister?"

* * *

NO one had noticed the tall, red-shirted figure who had quietly ridden up on the yellow-and-white Wyandot pony, and now sat saddle with apparent listlessness, watching Curlett out of cool, expressionless gray eyes.

"And who the devil are you?" snapped Curlett.

"Name's Jones," the man on the Wyandot replied softly. "Jericho Jones."

Another rider ranged up, a grizzled oldster with skinny buckskin-clad shanks who now calmly stationed himself beside Jericho Jones.

"And my name's Jerkline Hennessy," he announced with a fierce stare at the Curlett contingent. "In case you was thinkin' of makin' anything out of it!"

Ilda and Martin had turned and were now standing up surprisedly at Jericho.

Ilda was the first to find voice. "Why—why you must be Uncle Jericho!" she exclaimed, and for a moment a pleased flush brightened the dead-white pallor of her face. Then, putting her head on Martin's arm: "This is Martin," she said, "and I'm Ilda. We're—we're glad you're here."

"Glad to be here," said Jericho Jones. He nodded to Mrs. Jebb, who of the women of the train stood nearest to him. "Ma'am, this little lady looks a mite peaked to me. I wonder would you mind takin' her back to her wagon and see she gits a little rest?"

"But Uncle Jericho," protested Ilda, "I'm all right now! I—"

"That's it, ma'am," Jericho said, ignoring Ilda's protests while he calmly motioned Mrs. Jebb towards the wagons with her. "You kin see she needs some shuteye."

He turned to Martin. "So you were thinkin' of sellin' the mine?" he said.

"Well I hadn't reached any definite decision. But if the mine's played out, why then—"

"Who said anything about it's bein' played out?" Jericho swung his glance coolly towards Curlett. "Jake Gurney tell you that?"

"Gurney?" Martin looked blank.

"Gurney, Curlett," Jericho said. "One name smells as bad as the other."

"By golly, stranger," Curlett burst out, "you'd better keep that tongue of yours civil, or—" His hand swept towards his hip, a movement which was arrested as Jerkline's Paterson pistol covered him.

The old man spat. "Get right on with your speechifyin', perfessor," he said mildly to Jerciho. "I cal'late old Betsy here kin pacify this gent till yo're done finished."

"Thanks, Buzzard Bait." Jericho turned to Martin. "Your father write you anything about a pardner he'd been havin' trouble with?" he asked.

"Why yes. Yes, he did. But he didn't mention who—"

"That's the man." Jericho nodded curtly towards Curlett. "Jake Gurney, alias Buck Curlett."

Before Martin could speak, Jericho addressed Curlett again. "Take your two polecat friends, Curlett," he said, "and rack out of here. And don't come back. Savvy?"

Curlett trembled with rage. "You'll wish I was back before you've gone very far with this outfit!" he blazed. "If yuh had any kind of eyes in your head yuh could see it's a ghost train—that everybody in it's starvin' to death!"

"Get out," Jericho repeated softly.

Curlett motioned to his men. "Come on, you hombres," he snarled. "We'll let 'em git their bellies swelled up on a few o' them nice ropy ox steaks, and then see what kind of a tune they'll play!"

Jericho impassively watched them ride away. Then he turned to Martin. "I didn't want to blat this out in front of your sister, Martin," he said gravely. "I reckon you'd better take a brace, son."

Martin's face had gone white. "Father?" he breathed.

Jericho nodded. "Happened two days before I left," he said. "I hung around hopin' to pick up some clue as to who done it. I couldn't find a thing."

"You mean—you mean father was—"

"We found him dead in his bunk," Jericho said slowly. "With a huntin' knife a foot long stickin' out of his back!"

CHAPTER THREE

Feathered Death!

A MILE farther on they had set up camp. Here, where the gorge broke off and for a mile and a half flattened into a plain favored by a sparse vegetation, they made a ring of their wagons and turned eight of their trail-battered

oxen out to graze upon the few scattered hillocks of coarse grass which the terrain afforded.

Dave Hasbrouck's team, chosen as the weakest of the lot, had been kept behind and butchered. The decision to do this had been reached at a train council called by Jim Randolph immediately upon their arrival at the camp site.

"We've got to eat," Jim told the grim-faced men and women gathered around him, "and Jericho Jones says game in these parts has practically disappeared. It don't seem like we got any choice but to butcher a couple of the oxen. That'll mean we'll have to leave some of our things behind. We can't ask Dave and his wife to do all the sacrificin'."

His gaze briefly searched their firm glances. "But there's gonna be an advantage to this too," he brought out. "We'll be able to travel faster with lighter loads. And with only eight oxen, there'll be that much more graze for those we got left."

Martin Jones sulkily voiced disapproval. "You were paid to see we got through with the stuff we wanted to bring," he objected. "Now you're welshin' on your agreement."

"Oh, Martin—please!" Ilda Jones' eyes were still red and swollen from the tears that had come when she had been told of her father's murder. Now they were filling again as she looked across at her brother's sullen mouth. "Can't you see, Martin, that this is a life and death matter for us all?" she asked him. "Can't you realize—"

"I realize, all right!" Martin's dark eyes flared jealously. "I realize you don't care a thing about your brother—or about tryin' to track down the skunks that murdered father! All you care about is your little tin god, Jim Randolph! As long as you've got him to—"

Ilda broke in: "Stop it, Martin! Stop it, I tell you!" She took a tense step forward, her hands squeezing into fists and her voice shaking. "Have you gone crazy?" she panted. "Have you gone out of your head completely?"

"You're the crazy one!" Martin's eyes glittered. "Don't call me crazy! If you hadn't gone and set your feather—"

Abruptly, he stopped. Ilda's hands had swept up to her face. There was a swish of her skirt as she pivoted. Then she was running with a concentrated fury back towards her wagon, sobbing hysterically.

Jerkline Hennessy slanted a look at Martin's blood-drained face. "Son, I reckon you put yore foot into it that time," he remarked feelingly. "The little lady's plumbed riled."

"You look out I don't git riled," Jericho told the old man, "and aim a foot at the seat of your pants!" He swung up his arm to Martin's shoulder. "You've got to cool down, son," he urged gently. This trail's tough enough to make any man jumpy, but flyin' off the handle ain't gonna lick it."

"Aw, let me alone!" Martin jerked free. He fixed Jericho with a hard stare, then without another word wheeled and walked away.

Watching him go, Jim Randolph shrugged. "Better just let him be," he advised Jericho. "He'll be all over it by mornin'. He—"

"By grab, lookit over there!" Jerkline's excited cry turned them, swung their glances simultaneously in the direction of his stiffly pointed finger. "Cookin' smoke," the old man indicated, "down there where them tradin' buzzards was headin' when they fogged outta here."

Jim Randolph stared towards the tenuous spindle of smoke. "Can't be our wagons they're interested in," he muttered. "But that Curlett hombre sure was showin' a heap of interest in the Jones' gold mine. "

Jericho nodded, a reflective hardness tightening his gray eyes. "It's the mine they're after, all right. Curlett's figurin'

he kin starve us out and then step in and force Ilda and Martin to turn it over to him."

Tom Cantell observed, "Don't guess a starvin' man would think much of a gold mine, compared to a wagonload of grub."

Jericho's glance grimly assessed the tense faces around him. He said, "We'll have to post a double guard tonight, and everybody else sleep with their rifles handy. Starvin' takes time, and an *orejano* like Curlett might not wanta wait that long."

"Them low-down sidewindin' sons!" breathed Jerkline. "Why'n't we rack down there right now and arrest 'em fur the murder of Adam Jones?"

"Because we got no proof they did it," Jericho answered him. "Nobody heard Curlett make that threat against Adam but Adam himself, and suspicion and proof is hosses of two sep'rate colors." He added thoughtfully: "Looks to me like Curlett must'a' got wind of Adam deedin' over the mine to his children, and come on here hopin' to run into 'em, just like he done. The tradin' idee was just a side issue—but now he's prob'ly figurin' it's gonna work out for him pretty good."

"Say," broke out Homer Jebb, "what d'ya say we start t' work on that ox meat? My gut's so danged empty I could chaw whang leather and not complain."

* * *

A HALF hour later the smell of sizzling meat permeated the atmosphere, and the camp took on a more cheerful aspect as the fires licked ruddily around the black-c[illegible]ed grills and threw up their dancing flames to the white Osnaburg hoods of the Conestogas.

With all hands watching the roasting meat, no one noticed Martin Jones as he stepped back unobtrusively to the outer rim of the firelight and then turned suddenly, and started at a jerky stride out into the gathering darkness of the prairie.

A full moon was coming up, and under its lambent light objects became clearly defined and it was not difficult to see. A thin twist of smoke still straggled upward into the sky from where Jerkline had spotted the other camp's fire, and it was towards this that Martin Jones was heading, moving more cautiously now as he kept an alert watch near rocks and brush patches for signs of lurking Diggers.

No interruption to his progress occurred however, and he was almost within reach of the camp when a rustling sound somewhere in the brush nearby brought him up short. He remained crouched a moment, tensely listening, but when there was no recurrence of the sound he moved on again, proceeding with a cautious slowness on his hands and knees. He was nearly to the ridge from which he could look down on the camp when he heard Curlett's voice. He reached the ridge and looked down.

The camp was built against a little recess in the hillside, and two men sat smoking in the dwindling light of the campfire—Curlett, and Red Fentriss. Behind, the horses made dim shadows against the silvered slant of the hill, but there was no sign of the third man, the half-breed Pete Cordova, unless he was bedded down somewhere in the darkness farther back.

Crouched behind a ledge of rock, Martin now caught Curlett's words: "I tell yuh there's nothin' to be spooked up about! What if this Jericho Jones hombre does savvy I was Adam Jones' pardner? He can't prove—"

"He might've recognized the knife," Fentriss put in. "Found out where it was bought, and traced it back to yuh that way."

A freezing paralysis gripped Martin as Curlett's curt laugh racketed up through the gloom.

"That dumb bullwhacker?" Curlett

laughed again. "If he'd had anything on me, he'd have got it off his chest this afternoon when we were tryin' to bluff that kid into sellin' us the mine."

Frentiss said, "Well, now we got to do it the hard way. Slow up their train and starve 'em out."

"And mebbe that ain't all," Curlett insinuated.

Martin sucked in a quivering breath. These men were dangerous renegades! And one, he now knew, was the cowardly assassin who had plunged that knife into the back of his father.

The words of the two men merged, as he tried to breathe against the savage hammering of his heart. He surpressed a crazy impulse to pull his gun and start blasting at the pair immediately. That would do no good, he reasoned cautiously. He'd be lucky to get even one of the men, before they got him. And shots would draw Cordova, wherever he was, as well as any others who might be with the gang.

The thing to do was get back as quickly and quietly as possible and warn the train. Not a minute should be lost. Unless he got to them and warned them, they might easily head straight into ambush when they started rolling again in the morning.

Strangely at this moment he thought of Jim Randolph and a queer exultancy shook him! He'd show up Randolph now! Thought because he was only eighteen he was still a kid, did they? Well' they'd have to change their thinking now. Maybe when he got back and they all came to realize that he'd been the means of saving their train—

His thought abruptly broke off, and at the same instant he felt a warning chill. Curlett and Frentiss no longer were down there by the fire. They had disappeared!

He stared down at the fire's fading embers in sudden shocked alertness. Had he moved and given himself away? Had they heard something and gone out to prowl around in the dark? He remained tense, trying to pierce the darkness beyond the fire. No sound came, no trace of movement. At last, conscious of a strange dead heaviness in him, he twisted around and started working his way back cautiously towards his own camp.

A dull cold seemed to have settled at the base of his spine, and as he crept slowly on he was aware of an odd feeling of lurking danger, a presentiment, almost, of death. He jerked up suddenly, tense in every muscle.

Ahead and away to his right there had been a distinct rustling sound, and he thought he had caught also a brief low murmur of voices. Heart pounding, he remained rigid, his ears straining for a repetition of the sounds. But now all was silent again; a hovering, deadly silence that pulled at his nerves and sent little tremors of cold racing up his back. He went on. . . .

It occurred to him that the trail back seemed farther than it had in. The hard rubble sandpapered his bruised knees, and the palm of his right hand was pulpily moist where a sharp stone had slashed it.

He must be nearly back now, he thought. The hoods of the wagons should be coming into sight in a minute; he could see in his mind how they would look, gleaming like pale mounds of snow under the moonlight. Then there would come the first faint drift of voices from around the campfire, and for once that would be a mighty pleasant and reassuring sound, he realized.

He was conscious of his heart pumping irregularly, and his ears buzzed with a peculiar dim roaring. Maybe they'd been right about him after all. Maybe he *was* just a kid. A man wouldn't be afraid, the way he was. A man. . . .

A cry leaped out at him through the dark and instinctively he lifted, thinking it a hail from the camp.

Instantly a soft whirring noise stirred the air and something hit him a staggering

blow in the chest. A thousand lights seemed to explode in front of his eyes as he fell. . . .

★ ★ ★

BACK at the wagon train camp, the evening's fare of roast ox had been agreeably augmented by a few strips of jerky and some hardtack biscuits contributed to the common larder from the saddlebags of Jericho Jones and Jerkline Hennessy. With the train's members preoccupied over the easing of their hunger pangs, no one had remarked Martin's absence but Ilda. She, after the meal was over, had gone quietly to Jericho and called it to his notice.

"I expect he's just off sulking somewhere," she said apologetically. "But I can't help feeling worried after what happened to little Cassie Cantwell."

Jericho patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. "Now, ain't no call for you to be worried," he soothed her. "Jim and I'll take a look. We'll have him back for you pronto."

They had started by quartering around the camp, then, finding no trace, had started at Jericho's suggestion towards Buck Curlett's camp. They had gone only a short distance when Jericho halted, grabbing Jim's arm.

"Listen!" he whispered tensely. "Over there by that willow brush!"

At first, it seemed like hardly more than a slight rustling of leaves by the wind; then there was a distinct sound of slow, toilsome movement.

"Come on!" snapped out Jericho. "But keep your gun ready. It might be a trap."

They circled the brush cautiously, then abruptly halted as a sudden low moan ran out to them through the dusk.

"Somebody's in there hurt!" cried Jim Randolph.

Jericho leaped forward, Jim Randolph following. And then he saw it. A crawling, shadowy figure advancing towards him through the dimness—the figure of Martin Jones, with the stiff-feathered haft of an arrow jutting from his chest. Then Jericho and Jim were beside him, and had lain his head back comfortably against a rock with Jim's coat for a pillow.

Martin looked up at them haggardly. "Thanks," he breathed out feebly. "Better." A hollow cough racked him. "Tell Ilda. Sorry. . . . "

"Shucks," Jericho said to him, "you'll be tellin' her yourself, feller. An arrow ain't nothin'. Ain't as bad as lead, noways."

Martin shook his head. "Bad," he whispered. "I . . . know." Weakly, he motioned Jericho closer. Then, as Jericho bend down: "Found out—something." He was breathing more laboredly, forcing out each word with tremendous effort. "Man that—that murdered—father. It was—"

Suddenly he gasped. A dry rattle choked off his words, and his head rolled sideways and was still.

Jericho slowly straightened. He took off his hat, staring down somberly at the dark unmoving shape upon the ground.

"Diggers again," Jim Randolph breathed out bitterly.

"I wonder," said Jericho Jones.

CHAPTER FOUR

Avalanche of Doom

IN the morning, the train was on its way again. The sun creeping over the horizon laid a harsh red glare on the swaying hoods of the wagons, and the air was gray and coldly penetrating. Making a last look back at the bleak little cross on the hillside, Jericho Jones shivered.

"Seems like a lonesome place to leave the boy," he remarked to Jerkline Hennessy, riding along beside him.

"He ain't mindin'," Jerkline said.

They rode on in somber silence. After a time, Jericho suggested: "You better sashay ahead, Buzzard Bait, and scout the canyon. We'll be headin' into it soon, and Brother Curlett might figure we're gitttin' on a little too fast to suit his purposes."

Jerkline loped away and Jericho moved up beside the drag-end wagon, which today was Jim Randolph's.

Jim sat above on the front seat, Nancy having left him to ride in the wagon ahead with Ilda Jones.

"How's Ilda?" Jericho now asked as he drew even with Jim and held his Wyandot down to the slogging pace of the oxen.

"Better'n I thought she'd be," Jim answered thoughtfully. "She almost cried her heart out when she heard about her father. Now with Martin gone too, I guess she figures that nothin' more that happens can make any difference."

Jericho shook his head. "I don't guess she figures that, Jim. Not so long as she's still got you."

Embarrassedly, Jim changed the subject. "What'd you mean last night when you said *maybe* it was Diggers that shot Martin? That was a Digger arrow, wasn't it?"

"Might've been. But that don't mean it was a Digger shot it."

"You don't mean you think—?"

"I don't mean anything—yet. All I say is, this train's in a bad spot. And we got to keep watchin' Curlett like a hawk."

"How long you figure that ox meat'll last us?"

Jericho shrugged. "Hard to say. It won't last us to the diggin's, that's certain."

Jim Randolph grew thoughtful. "Maybe your friend Jerkline was right," he said presently. "Maybe we should'a' taken a holt onto Curlett when we had the chance."

"There's still no proof. We couldn't—"

A sudden low rumbling, like distant thunder, cut him off. Cumulatively the sound grew, developing into a tremendous solid roar that rolled up the pass in a swelling reverberation.

Jim Randolph gasped. "Look up there!"

But Jericho already had looked—and seen.

Ahead of them, scarcely more than twenty yards from the lead wagon, the mouth of the canyon through which they had to pass was blocked by a great landslide of shale and rock. Some of the shale still was slithering down from the escarpment above, and now the dust boiling up all around momentarily hid the scene.

Jericho spoke at last with a thoughtful tensity. "I hope the old man made it." Then: "I just sent Jerkline up there to scout that pass," he explained.

Jim Randolph whistled. He had halted the oxen, as the others before him now had also. His look down at Jericho from the wagon seat was grim.

"Well," he left the weight of a pause between his words, "looks like you had the right savvy on Señor Curlett. He sure wants us to hustle up with our starvin'!"

Jericho's mouth was rigid. He picked up the Wyandot's reins. "I'm ridin' ahead to see how bad it looks," he said. "You see if the girls are all right."

He rode at a gallop, ignoring a shout from Dave Hasbrouck as he passed. Before the huge pile-up of rock and debris that stopped the canyon mouth, he halted in stunned discouragement. A man on a horse could maneuver his way across; but oxen dragging heavy-loaded wagons, never.

Dave Hasbrouck came running up from the lead wagon. He stood a moment staring at the slide without speaking, eyeing it with a dull and heavy hopelessness.

At last he said, "Curlett again, huh?" but it was more a statement than a question.

"It wasn't no earthquake," Jericho answered dryly.

Homer Jebb and Tom Cantwell had now come up and were gazing despairingly at the great heap of debris.

Homer shook his head. "Well," to Jericho, "what d'you cal'cate we kin do now?"

"Dig it out," said Jericho calmly.

"But man, that'd take days! We couldn't—"

"We'll talk it over at camp," Jericho said.

When they were all assembled, he told them the alternative to digging out. A long toilsome trek back, for more than twenty miles. And then a harder, steeper trail up through the mountains, probably consuming more time and entailing more danger than to remain here and dig the pass clear.

"And you call that a choice," grumbled Homer Jebb, when he had finished. "Come on, where's our shovels? Let's git diggin'!"

The warning clink of a shod hoof spun them around, held them gasping and speechless at the sight of Buck Curlett riding calmly into their camp.

"Well of all the blasted gall!" blurted Tom Cantwell. "The sidewinder blows down half a mountain onto us, an' then—"

"Howdy, everybody." Curlett spoke casually, but as he came up before them and reined in, his eyes flicked at the company with a narrowed watchfulness. "Just thought I'd drop back and see if yuh'd changed your minds about wantin' a little grub." His glass-sharp glance dropped to Tom Cantwell's gun-reaching hand. "I wouldn't be gettin' any loco notions," he warned softly. "You're all covered from in back o' them rocks up there."

* * *

JERICHO JONES ranged his glance over the gaunt, somber faces of the train's members. Some of the faces showed resignation and discouragement; none displayed fear. He swung his gaze back deliberately upon Curlett.

"If you want to start a ruction here, Curlett," he said levelly, "I reckon you know you'd be one of the first ones ventilated."

Homer Jebb had been looking apprehensively at the gray, sunken cheeks of his wife. Now he spoke, reluctantly: "What'd you'd be askin' for a little flour, Curlett?"

Curlett's laugh hit at them like a slap in the face. "I ain't dealin' out no tenpenny lots," he sneered, and looked down to where Ilda Jones stood, a thin, tense figure with a gray shawl hugged up around her shoulders. "I'm offerin' yuh my whole half wagonload of grub," he announced flatly. "And the price is a clear legal title to the minin' claim of Miss Jones here."

A swift murmur of resentment ran around the little band of emigrants, abruptly dying as Ilda Jones stepped out before them.

She addressed them with a sober earnestness. "I'm willing to sell the mine," she said quietly, "if you're willing to have me. But first I want you to know something that so far I've only talked over with Jim Randolph." She flushed faintly and turned her glance with a little smile up to the train captain. Then: "When we get to California," she went on, "I want you all to be my partners in the mine—on equal shares. We've been through the same dangers and hardships together; why shouldn't we share good fortune together?" She turned, faced Jim Randolph. "Captain Randolph, I move you put this matter to a vote!"

Jim Randolph searched the faces of the company. "I've got a pretty good notion of what this vote'll be," he began. "But just to satisfy—"

Curlett exploded: "You're all plain dumb fools if you're thinkin' you'll ever get out of here alive to work that mine!"

He jerked his thumb towards the blockaded pass: "How you gonna get by that?" he demanded, then swung around and drove his furious glance at Ida Jones. "And look what the Diggers did to your brother!" he hurled at her brutally. "Look what they did to the little Cantwell girl!"

"You kin never a' mind that," Tom Cantwell threw in harshly. "Put 'er to a vote, Jim!"

Jim Randolph tried again. "All right. All those in favor of holdin' onto the mine and keepin' on fur Californy say—"

The shouted chorus of "ayes" abruptly drowned him out.

"And Miss Jones," spoke out Dave Hasbrouck fervently, "we sure are thankin' you for your generosity, ma'am."

Curlett wheeled his horse with an angry jerk. "You're a bigger pack of fools than I thought you was!" he flared. "Stay here and die then! Stay here and—"

He stopped, taut, as a sound of hoofbeats grew louder up the pass. Eyes of the entire company swiveled simultaneously.

"It's Jerkline!" cried Homer Jebb. "And somethin's the matter! He's almost outta the saddle!"

Jerkline sat hunched forward across his tree, the reins of his big mestino dragging in the dust.

For a moment Jericho Jones stood rigid, watching. Then with an angry cry he leaped forward, grabbing at the bridle of the frothing mestino.

Jerkline's left arm hung limply, and suddenly they all saw the ugly shaft of the arrow that had pierced it. The old man swayed, staring down at Jericho crankily.

"Well, yuh gotta stand there an' gawk?" he panted. "Judas Priest, git busy somebuddy and pull this danged toothpick outta my hide!"

He fainted as they were lifting him gently down from his horse, and for a moment, in the excitement, the little group forgot about Buck Curlett.

The big rider had taken a single gloating glance at Jerkline; now, as he gathered up his reins, his heavy voice raked them again.

"I'm givin' yuh twenty-four hours to reconsider that vote," he told them flatly. "If yuh haven't changed yer minds by then you kin be lookin' fur somethin' a heap site worse than Digger arrows!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Midnight Inferno

INEXPLICABLY, the twenty-four hours had passed without incident. And then another twenty-four, still with no sign or word of Curlett. But in those two days, almost a miracle had been accomplished at the mouth of the gorge. They had worked in relays, the women as well as the men, taking only time for needed food and rest. And now, as the evening of the second day wore on, the pass had been cleared sufficiently to permit passage of the wagons.

A waning moon was coasting over the crest of the distant mountains as they finished splitting up the last large boulder, carting away the broken chunks on a crude travois drawn by ox team. Jericho had built two of these rude but serviceable carriers, and their use had enabled the company to finish in two days a job that might otherwise have taken a week or longer.

Now, with the way open for resumption of their journey, Jericho and Jim Randolph stood together at the mouth of the pass, appreciatively looking over the result of their toil. Homer Jebb and Tom Cantwell were on guard back at the camp; the rest of the company were in the wagons, snatching a few hours of sleep in preparation for the breaking of camp in the morning.

"The thing I don't savvy," Jim Randolph was saying to Jericho, "is why we ain't heard from Curlett. He said he was givin' us twenty-four hours. And now it's almost two days, and not a peep out of him."

Jericho said, "Don't worry; he ain't forgotten us."

"Maybe he's been waitin' to see how long it would take us to clear the pass," Jim hazarded. Then: "Funny you ain't heard from Jerkline since he went out on that scout."

"I'm kind of worried about the old scoot myself," Jericho admitted. "That Digger arrow Pete Cordova planted in him sure made a mean-lookin' wound."

"You really think Jerkline saw Cordova shoot that arrow at him?"

"Sure! The old mossyhorn's got eyes like a cat."

"Then there ain't much doubt, guess, that Cordova's the one killed Martin."

"No," rejoined Jericho shortly. "Cordova's half redskin. Chances are he kin handle a bow as good as any Digger."

He added, after a thoughtful pause: "Likely the killin' of the little Cantwell girl by a real Digger is what give Curlett his idee of boogerin' yuh with an Injun scare. And then Martin played right in his hands. The boy likely found out who dry-gulched his dad—but Curlett or one of the others heard him snoopin' around and sneaked off and had Cordova ambush him. Made it look like a Digger job."

Jim shook his head. "Curlett's slick. Looks like we'll be pretty lucky if we—"

He stopped, half twisting around as Jericho tensely gripped his arm. "Thought I heard talkin'," Jericho whispered. "Up there on the hill back o' them rocks!"

For a moment they stood silent, dark rigid shapes under the moonlight as their ears strained for a recurrence of the sound. There was none. Behind them, a breeze fitfully stirred the leaves of a hackberry tree; otherwise all was quiet.

"You sure—" Jim began, but Jericho's low voiced warning cut him short. "I'm makin' a *pasear* up there," Jericho announced. "You hustle back and rouse up the camp. But do it quiet. This may be Curlett movin' in fur a showdown."

"But you can't go up there alone! If you'll just wait till I—"

"No time fur waitin'," Jericho cut in grimly. "If they's a ruction, I aim to be *behind* them jaspers—which is where they won't be expectin' anybody. Now shake a shank!"

He waited till Jim Randolph had moved away, then started in a wide circling maneuver towards the rocks. He was in quite a ways before he saw the fire, a small one, built in a niche between two high boulders. He could see also now the dim shadows of men moving about, but neither they nor the fire, he knew, would be visible to those down at the camp. He went on, picking his way cautiously over the uneven, hummocky ground.

The sudden fiery flash against the dark pulled him up taut. Like a swishing meteor, flame streaked across the sky, ending with an abrupt burst of sparks down where the white hoods of the Conestogas gleamed palely under the moonlight. A second flash followed the first, and suddenly Jericho felt his breath jam. Cordova! The breed was shooting flaming arrows into the wagons!

The second arrow had hit squarely and one of the huge hoods was ablaze. Jericho could hear shouts and sounds of excited movement down in the camp. A third arrow whizzed to the mark and another wagontop caught, the Osnaburg-covered frame leaping into flame violently. The sky was now lighted with an eerie glow, and shadowy figures could be seen darting about among the wagons. Jericho swore impatiently. Were they loco down there? Why didn't they let the wagons burn and get to cover?

FROM the rocks ahead of him, shots rapped stutteringly against the night. They had opened fire on the train! Rifles from the camp slammed answer, and from the smacking ricochet of the slugs, Jericho knew that some of the lead was hammering in close to the target.

Crouched back of a tree stump, he waited, his finger readied upon the trigger of his Texas Paterson. Curlett was no fool; he'd savvy quick enough that it was just one gun threatening him from behind. And then. . . .

There was no longer any sign of men running about below, Jericho noted thankfully. The fire in one of the wagons had been put out, but another was now totally ablaze and burning fiercely. It was like a great torch lighting up the camp and would make the train's defenders easy targets, Jericho despairingly saw, once Curlett's followers had moved down a little closer. There was just one chance. If he could feint successfully, distract Curlett just long enough to allow those flames to die down. . . .

Curlett's voice, smashing above the hubbub, drew him up tense. "All right," Curlett was shouting, "start fannin' out! We're headin' down!"

Jericho sucked in a tight breath. This was it! If he let them get any nearer to those wagons, with that fire lighting up the whole camp. . . .

He fired twice at movement in a patch of brush below and to his left. A surprised yell ran across the night; then Curlett's voice was exploding furiously. "Somebody's in back of us! Keep spread out! We'll have to get him first!"

Jericho fired once towards the sound of the voice and at the same instant he leaped away from the stump. He could hear the bullets thudding into it as he reached the rock he had noticed, off to his right. He waited tensely. Another shot ripped the dark, and Jericho's Texas Paterson flipped up as he fired at the flash. There was silence for a moment. Then lead pounded the rock in a ricocheting hail.

Flattened behind it, Jericho took time to jack out his empties and reload. Another shot spurted at him as he leaned out and carefully fired again. He felt the slash of the lead across his arm, and then saw the blood pooling out, a few inches above his wrist. The Texas Paterson fell from his relaxed fingers. His arm felt paralyzed. Swearing softly, he whipped off his *reboso* and swiftly knotted on a tourniquet.

A strange voice yelled: "Must've winged him. Ain't a peep from up there now!"

Simultaneously Jericho saw a faint shadow move out from a clump of willow brush off to his right and start wriggling towards him through the grass. He tried to pick up his gun, but found his nerveless fingers unable to hold it. He took it in his left hand.

To stand any chance now, he realized,

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he'd have to wait for them to come in closer. And then what chance would he have, forced to shoot awkwardly with his left hand? The grim thought came to him that at least he'd take a couple of them with him in the final showdown. He'd—

He swung around with a start. Somebody was creeping up behind him! He spied the low crouched figure, and then someone spoke in a tense undertone across the dark.

"Hold yore lead, dern it!" warned a querulously familiar voice. "Yuh might be needin' it fur somebody else's britches."

"Jerkline!" Jericho breathed out fervently.

The old man crawled up, scowling. He stared critically at Jericho's limp right arm. "Kin yuh shoot lefty?" he demanded abruptly.

Jericho grinned. "That's what I'm aimin' to find out," he said.

"Huh! Well, I'll be hunkerin' behind this rock right alongside o' yuh here, in case yuh find out yuh *can't.*"

Bent low, the old man was starting towards the rock when his foot pressed on a dry twig. The twig broke with a loud snap and Jerkline swore. Simultaneously a shot roared redly out of the night.

Jericho's gun was up and he fired instantly at the flash. He heard a hoarsely blurted cry, then off in the darkness somewhere a flat thud. Then silence. . . .

"By grab," marveled Jerkline, "yuh got him! And left-handed too!"

Jericho snapped, "Shut up and keep your eye peeled," and concentrated his gaze out in the dark again. He heard low voices, but in the gloom was unable to fix the spot from which they were coming. Now there were sounds of cautious movement, but again he could guess at the location only generally. His eyes tried to pierce the murk, but the moon had vanished behind a cloud and all he could see now was vague, gray-splotched darkness.

Then it came—abruptly and without warning. The three figures were so close that they seemed to jump up and converge on the rock from almost in front of him. The red splotches of the guns tore at the dark like bloody fingers, slashing and ripping. Jericho was aware of firing mechanically at these splotches, was vaguely conscious of Jerkline's gun hammering away to his right. Then Buck Curlett's blocky figure was in front of him.

With a crazy yell, Curlett sprang at him, hurling away his empty gun. The big man's arms whipped around him, put a terrible grinding pressure on his helpless right arm. Agonizingly, he strained to a last effort. The muscles of his good arm knotted painfully as he forced the gun towards Curlett. He heard Curlett's grunt, felt Curlett's hot breath pelting his face. He realized dimly that the gun's muzzle was pressing Curlett's thigh. Then Curlett's knee drove up, sank sickeningly into his groin. He heard the gun go off without any consciousness of having pulled the trigger. . . .

ILDA JONES and Jim Randolph were bending over him. A huge fire made from the remains of the one ruined wagon lighted up the camp. Whisky ran in a reviving trickle down his throat.

"I'm all right," he said, and looked around him vacantly. "But Jerkline—"

"Jerkline's all right too," Jim Randolph quickly volunteered. "Went off a few minutes ago sayin' he had a little unfinished business to attend to."

"Look!" Homer Jebb's excited cry swung the eyes of the company towards the mouth of the canyon. Careening up the pass was a white-hooded wagon drawn by a span of lively-stepping mules. And perched on the high front seat, snapping his whip over their heads with a brisk enthusiasm, sat Jerkline Hennessy.

"Well I'll be caterwopously dog-

goned!" breathed out Dave Hasbrouck.

Jerkline pulled up with a flourish, then swung on the seat to permit one skinny leg to dangle down jauntily over the side.

"Well, here's thet hawg fat the doctor done ordered," he grinned at the company. "Only I got one o' Curlett's fellers trussed up back here too, so look out yuh don't git the wrong pig."

Jericho Jones looked up at his partner quizzically. "So you were just goin' away on a little scout," he said.

Jerkline leaned out to spit. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Well, I figgered it might be a good idee to git this wagonload o' vittles a little nearer to where it might be needed. Almost had 'er here when I heard them shots and cal'clated I'd better have me a looksee." He paused and grinned. "Had a nice little pow-wow with the gent in back, after I'd gentled him down some. It was Curlett cold-decked yore brother."

Jericho spoke grimly: "Well, we saved the Vigilantes a job, anyways." He swung his glance reflectively to where Ilda Jones and Jim Randolph stood together. "Jim, I reckon you savvy I ain't no gold miner," he said. "I'll be a little worried about leavin' Ilda out there at the diggin's alone."

Jim Randolph fumbled awkwardly with his hat. "Why," he said finally, "I'll be able to keep an eye on her fur yuh, Jericho."

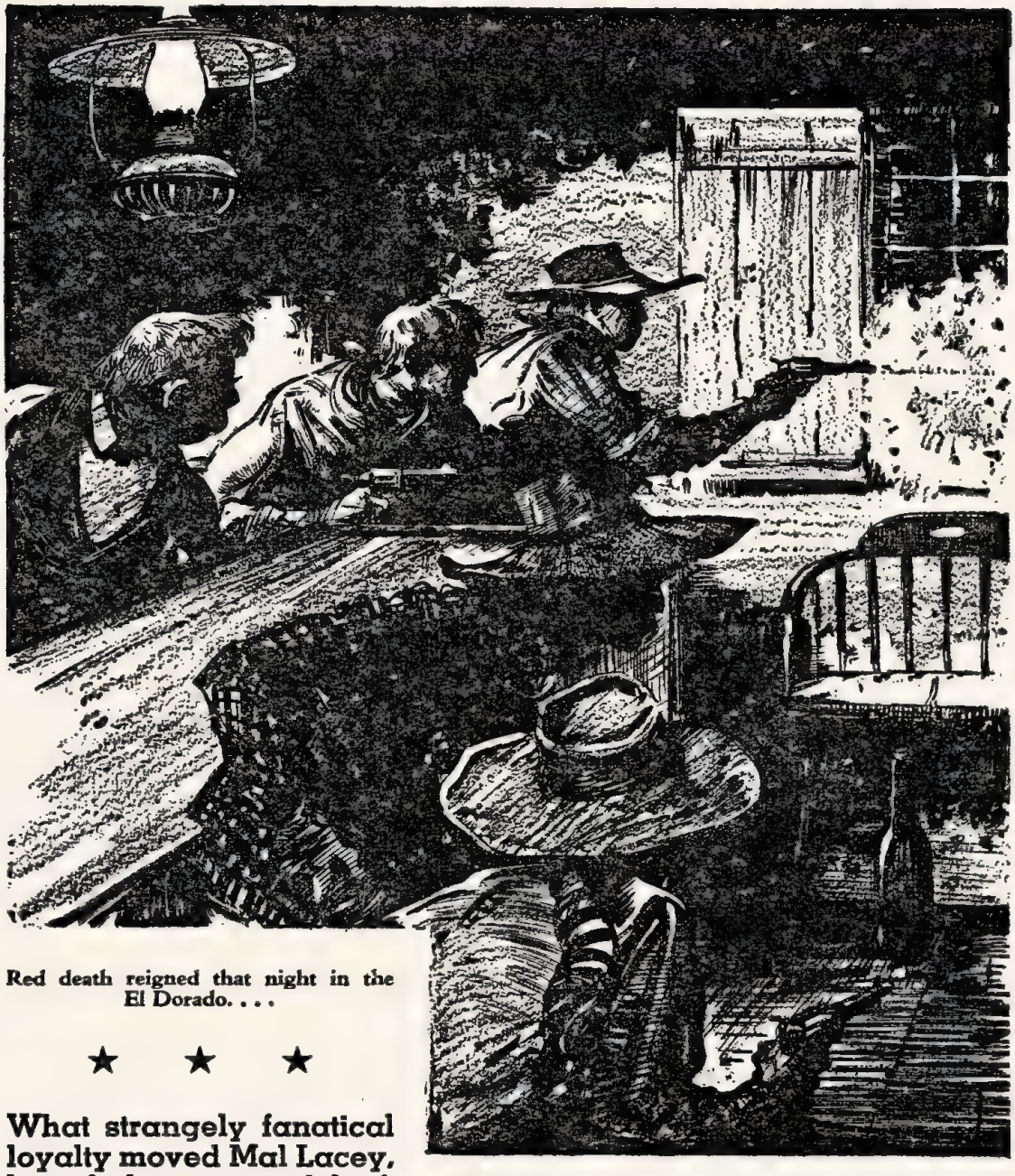
Nancy Randolph regarded her brother teasingly. "What Jericho wants to know, Jim, is how *long* you'll keep an eye on her."

Jim Randolph's trapped gaze swept the grinning faces around him. "Why," he stammered, "this ain't no place to—"

"It shore ain't!" cackled Jerkline from the wagon seat. "By grab, son, take the little lady out back where you kin tell it to her proper!"

THE END

The Black Sheep Prodigal



Red death reigned that night in the El Dorado. . . .

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What strangely fanatical loyalty moved Mal Lacey, branded outcast and thief, to masquerade as a badge-toting coward. . . . So that the few God-fearing men who remained in that blood-mad town might never know the tragic secret of the weakling who failed his sacred lawman's trust?

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Town-Tamer Needed!

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— By —
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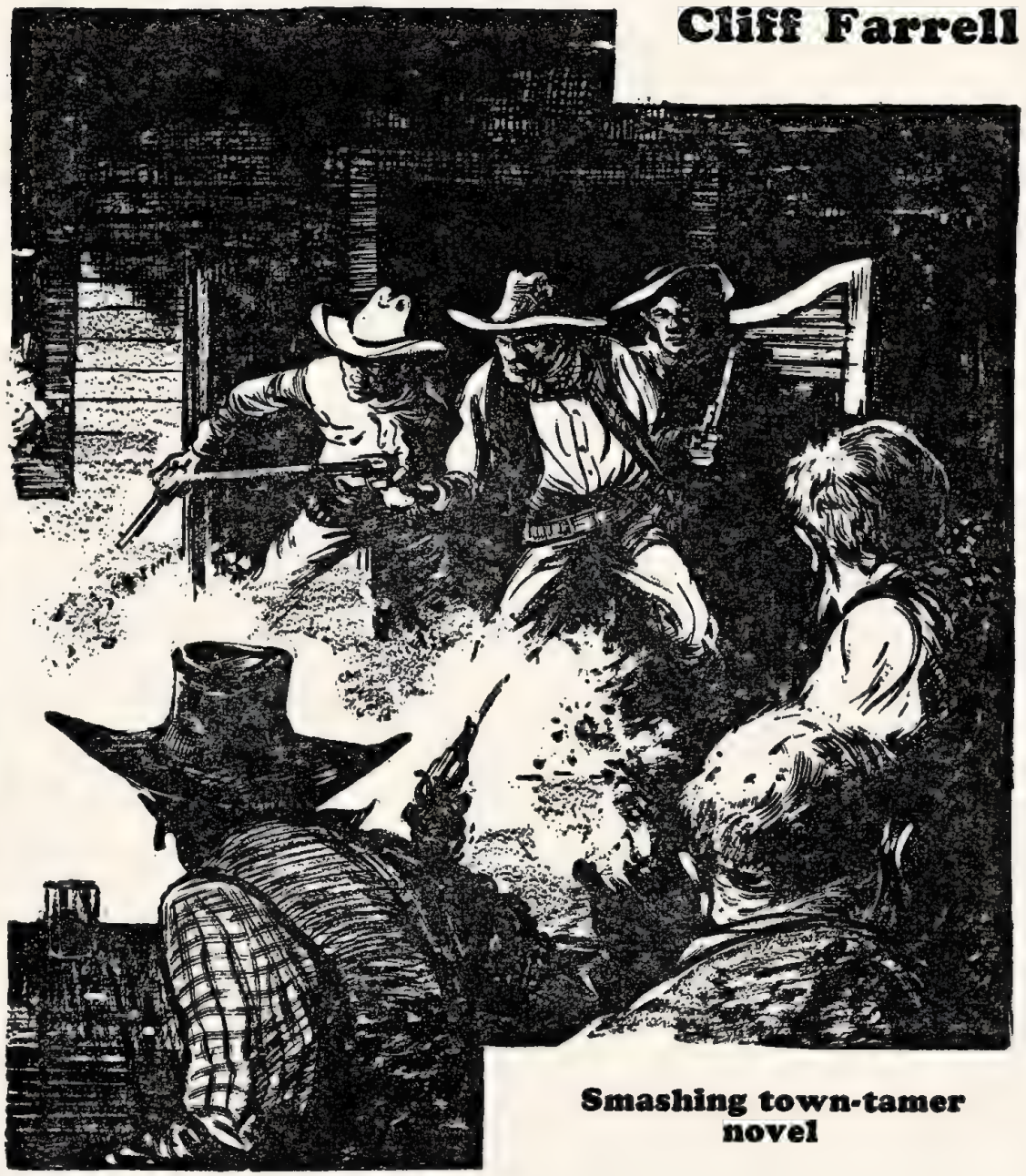

Smashing town-tamer novel

CHAPTER ONE

Town-Tamer Needed!

THERE was a reckless little grin on Mal Lacy's blunt-featured, stubble-covered face as he felt the empty box-car, in which he was an uninvited passenger, roll to a halt on the siding. Dimly he heard the receding locomotive clank away, with a single warning blast of its whistle, as if it had carried out one part of its job and was now, its responsibility toward that particular car ended, puffing self-importantly off to something else.

"This looks as good a spot as any to land," Mal grunted to himself as he rolled his soogan and buckled on his gunbelt. "Anyhow, I'm a day's distance from where I started this mornin'—wherever that was!"

He'd crawled into the car at a water-tank stop on the Red Desert at dawn,

Wears a Badge!

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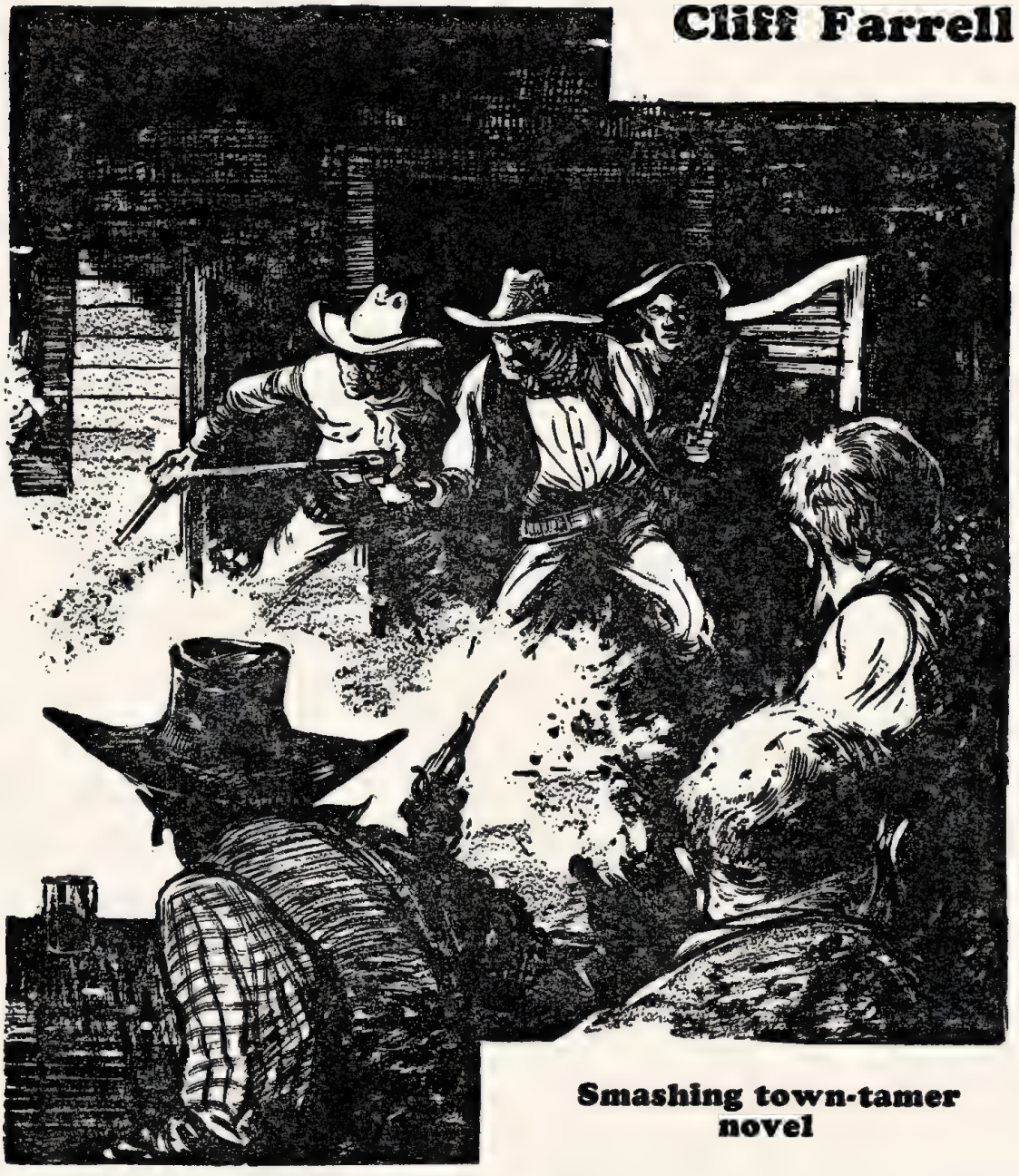

Smashing town-tamer novel

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He'd crawled into the car at a water-tank stop on the Red Desert at dawn,

neither knowing or caring what his destination might be. A drifter, sometimes saddle-tramp—when he had a horse and saddle—he had been following the tumbleweed trail for the past couple of years. A hundred or two hundred miles had been covered since he'd boarded the mixed freight, he knew. Tomorrow, he'd be somewhere else.

But as he swung open the door a sudden shock coursed through him, and his thin, embittered lips twisted into an ironic smile. "With a thousand different towns I could have hit," he muttered, "I had to end up back in Tamarack!"

For Mal Lacy had come home to the range he had never expected—or wanted—to see again.

For a moment, he stood looking at the familiar false-fronts of the main street which loomed in the early darkness beyond the loading chutes and the freight shed. A frown of puzzlement furrowed his forehead as the rhythmic tread of marching feet drifted from the town; a determined measure of sound in the softness of the evening, accompanied by the stirring strains of Onward Christian Soldiers, played on a small organ.

Though he had reason for not wanting to be seen in Tamarack—indeed, he had meant to lie low until the next train came along and hit the blind baggage—curiosity impelled him to circle the cattle pens and take a vantage point in the shadowed doorway of the freight shed. From here he had a view of the dust-deep street, and of the flickering, moving lights which told him a torchlight procession was on the move.

He had heard that Tamarack was booming on the strength of a silver strike which had been made in the Lost Wagon Hills fifteen miles to the west. The town had doubled in size in three years, but he saw that the growth was mainly represented in more than a score of new gambling houses, honkatonks and monte parlors. They stood in garish panoply, their green and red lights glittering luridly along the street.

As the parade approached, Mal identified the majority of the men in line. Two stern-eyed ranchers rode in the lead, carrying a banner which bore in big black letters: "Jeff Kling for Sheriff"

Following on a bunting-festooned flatbed wagon, Mal recognized Ebenezer Dobbs, the little round-stomached circuit rider. Dobbs sat at a parlor organ, his short legs laboring on the treads as he rolled out the strains of the martial hymn.

Jeff Kling, a stocky, homely cowman, rode saddleback at the head of a thin column of citizens and cowmen numbering no more than twenty. The marchers carried torches and placards proclaiming their intention to elect Jeff Kling as sheriff, a man who would uphold law and order.

Mal singled out a lithe, handsome cowboy in line who wore a flashy, cream-colored hat, green silk shirt, foxed breeches, and silver-spurred alligator skin boots. And as his glance moved to a ranch buckboard at the rear of the procession, he crowded farther back in the shadows.

* * *

A MASSIVE-SHOULDERED, crag-jawed rancher drove the buckboard. Mal wondered why Barr Brandon, who had always prided himself on his horsemanship, would be riding a wagon. Then, with a shock of dismay, he saw the crutches at the side of the owner of the old Circle B.

Painted women, gamblers and gun-hung men crowded from the doors of the honkatonks guffawing derisively, and hurling taunts at the marchers. An ugly tension gripped the street.

"Run the white-livered skunks out o' twon," a raucous voice bawled. "An' their candystick candidate along with 'em!"

Mal's throat was tight. There had been a time when he would have been riding proudly at Barr Brandon's side, facing with him this threat of conflict. But now. . . . Well, he did not even want Barr to know that he was alive.

He started to turn away. But the flash and roar of a six-shooter from the shadows of the cattle pens nearby jerked him around. He heard the scream of the slug, and the sickening sound as it tore through flesh and bone. He glimpsed the shadowy figure of the skulking man who had fired.

Already, Jeff Kling was sagging from the saddle. He hit the dust of the street with the limpless of death, and Mal saw the dark stain of blood between his shoulder blades. He had been shot in the back.

Men were staring, bewildered, trying to find out from which direction the shot had come. Mal saw the shadowy figure fading away into the darkness between the cattle chutes. He whirled, ran silently around a corral, and almost ran into the escaping killer.

A startled oath sounded, and the man jerked up his gun. Mal batted it aside as it exploded. Burning powder stung his cheek. He drove his fist into a soft paunch, and followed it with a crushing smash to the jaw.

The man reeled against the bars of a corral, and slid down in a limp heap, his six-shooter falling from his hand.

Mal peered in the faint starlight and recognized him as a tough, unsavory faro banker named Spot Drumm. He recalled the years when Spot Drumm, along with his older brother, Chain Drumm, had operated a gambling house in Tamarack.

Mal straightened, aiming to melt away into the darkness, but it was too late. Angry, shouting men with torches in their hands were streaming toward the scene. He realized now that any attempt to escape might bring a bullet.

Mal bent, swung Spot Drumm's stunned body across his shoulder, and headed toward the lighted street. Angry ranchers and citizens surrounded him, but he pushed through them with a word of explanation, and carried his burden to where a group of men surrounded Jeff Kling's body.

Ebenezer Dobbs was drawing a blanket over the murdered man, shaking his head sadly.

Mal dropped Spot Drumm as he would a sack of grain. "This is the man you're looking for," he said tersely. "I saw him as he fired the shot, an' heeled him down."

Barr Brandon, braced on his crutches, whirled. With him stood the flashily-garbed, good-looking cowboy. This was his son, Perry Brandon. The big rancher's leonine head reared back as Mal's straight gaze met his bleak eyes unswervingly.

"You!" he spat bitterly, staring at Mal as he would have at a ghost.

* * *

PERRY BRANDON was about the same age and build as Mal. They had often been mistaken as brothers in the past. They had grown up together and Perry Brandon, from childhood, had been in the habit of imitating Mal's mannerisms and way of talking.

There was no blood relationship between them. Barr Brandon and his motherly wife had raised Mal from babyhood after his parents had died of spotted fever. The Brandons had been a second father and mother to Mal, giving him the same affection and loyalty they bestowed on their own son and daughter. Barr Brandon had always been Mal's ideal of what a father should be. Now his fierce eyes held bitter, scorching contempt.

Chain Drumm, brother of the gambler Mal had captured, hurriedly barged his way through the bystanders. He was followed by a sallow-cheeked man wearing a sheriff's star and by half a dozen tough gunmen, some of whom had deputy's

badges pinned boldly to their shirts. . . .

"What's goin' on here, Brandon?" Chain Drumm bellowed, glaring at his brother who was beginning to stir around in the dust.

"You built a hangrope for your brother, Drumm," the rancher answered. "You sent him to murder Jeff Kling, but he was caught red-handed sneakin' away after carryin' out your order."

"I gave no orders to nobody," Chain Drumm jeered. "You can't git away with any raw frame-up like that. Who says Spot killed Jeff Kling?"

"I do," Mal spoke stonily.

Chain Drumm's pale, fish-cold eyes flickered as he turned. Taller than his brother, with puffy, dewlapped jowels, he was that rare and deadly combination —a gun-quick killer with brains and cunning.

"Well, doggone!" the man marveled. "If it ain't the blacksheep from the Circle B! What snake hole did you crawl out of? Maybe I begin to savvy the trap they're tryin' to shove Spot into."

Ebenezer Dobbs singled out the man wearing the sheriff's star. "I demand you arrest Spot Drumm, Sheriff," he thundered in his booming, pulpit voice. "He has committed a cowardly murder."

The lawman did not move, and Chain Drumm laughed mockingly. "I've got a half a dozen witnesses who'll testify Spot was playin' poker in the back room at the El Dorado when your hand-picked candidate for sheriff got rubbed out."

"No jury in the world would believe the testimony of a pack of scoundrels and blackguards," the minister roared. "I'll brand them for what they are, discredit them in open court as perjurers and hirelings."

"Maybe you figure a jury would believe the story of your pet witness," Chain Drumm sneered, jerking a thumb toward Mal, "after I tell 'em how he skipped out with ten thousand dollars in beef money belonging to the man who raised him as a son. He's nothin' but a low-down common thief!"

CHAPTER TWO

Law-Badge for a Coward

THERE was a sudden silence. Ebenezer Dobbs blinked. "How did you know—?" Barr Brandon burst out. Then he bit off the question.

Chain Drumm laughed again. "The rustling of the leaves told me why Mal Lacy dropped out of sight so sudden-like that night three years ago."

Drumm turned to the bystanders. "Now you can see through Barr Brandon's slick game. He brought in this crooked snake to frame a murder charge on my brother," he roared with bland indignation. "Brandon never explained why Mal Lacy disappeared that time. It's always been a mystery. But I happen to know that a big jag of gold money turned up missin' from Barr Brandon's safe the same night Mal Lacy rode off into the blue.

"Robbery's a prison offense if Barr Brandon wanted to prosecute. But more than that—it can be used as a club to force a man into doin' some dirty chore Brandon might have figured out. How do we know it wasn't Mal Lacy himself that killed Jeff Kling, to discredit my Law and Order League."

"Preposterous," little Ebenezer Dobbs bellowed, dancing around in a rage. "You're a clever, scheming scoundrel, Drumm, but everyone knows why Jeff Kling was slain, and by whose orders."

Chain Drumm, ignoring the minister, fixed Mal with his cold eyes. "If I was you, Lacy," he sneered, "I'd make myself hard to find in these parts. The climate around here ain't likely to build you up any."

Drumm linked arms with his groggy brother, who had got to his feet. "Come

His thugs were squeezing the lifeblood from both town and range. . . .

on, boys," he nodded to his gunmen. "The drinks are on me an' Spot."

Leading his men, Chain Drumm swaggered away, heading for the gaudy, green-lighted El Dorado.

"Scoundrels!" Ebenezer Dobbs roared after them. "Sons of Satan! You're branded with the mark of Cain—each and every one of you. But right and justice shall prevail in spite of your unholy work!"

The minister turned to Barr Brandon. "We must select another candidate at once," he said urgently. "There's no time to lose, with election day less than thirty-six hours away. Wake up, Barr. Don't you hear me?"

The crippled rancher was staring down at Jeff Kling's blanket-covered body.

"I sent Jeff to his death," he said, his voice husky. "I badgered him into takin' the risk, knowing that Chain Drumm had threatened to kill any man we put on the ticket. Jeff was my friend, my neighbor!"

"A martyr to a righteous cause," the circuit rider thundered. "Surely you do not mean to retreat now. Thieves and killers control this county. Rustlers prey upon you ranchers, and sharpers and grafters mulct the tax-payers. Jeff Kling's murder is all the more reason why every honest citizen must rally to the cause."

But Barr Brandon seemed hopelessly crushed. And Mal, too, felt disheartened at the way the group of solid citizens had thinned. Many had edged away. The handful who remained were plainly dubious and worried.

A hand touched Mal's arm and a soft voice spoke his name. Mal looked down into the wide, tear-misted blue eyes of a slim, winsome girl.

"Alice!" The name came with an effort from him.

He tried to turn away, but Alice Brandon's hand tightened on his arm, drawing him insistently out of earshot of the others.

"Until tonight I never heard an explanation why you left without any word, or without writing where you were," she breathed, her voice soft. "Dad never mentioned the loss of any money. Chain Drumm lied—tell me he lied, Mal! Oh, Mal—" She broke off, sobbing.

Tears ran down Alice Brandon's soft cheeks. Bare-headed, her honey-colored hair gleamed golden in the torchlight. Wearing a divided riding skirt, spurred boots and a shirtwaist, she was graceful and lovely.

She was Barr Brandon's daughter, and she had held Mal's heart in the palm of her hand since she had first put up her hair. She had been a vital, flaming beauty at eighteen, the last three years had given her poise, ripened her allure, softened the willful, impetuous character of her full mouth.

She was now a desirable young woman, who stood there looking at him with bittersweet memories of the past in her eyes, and a hurt and deep fear gnawing in her heart.

"I never wanted you to know, Alice," Mal said.

He swung on his heel and walked away from her, leaving her standing staring with her hands at her breast, gazing after him wide-eyed.

A WILD, heart-broken scream sounded, and Mal saw a comely, dark-haired woman alight from a buckboard which had just arrived, and throw herself on the blanketed body of Jeff Kling which men had lifted to a stretcher.

It was Edith Kling, wife of the murdered man, and Mal paused heart-sick as the sobs of the grieving woman ran through the silence.

Kling's death was hard enough on his friends, but to this grief-stricken woman . . .

Edith Kling lifted her head and pointed an accusing finger at Barr Brandon. "You're the cause of this," she screamed. "You and your fine talk about law and order and a man's duty. You were too cowardly to risk your own life in opposing Chain Drumm, so you plagued my man into facing the danger. And now he's dead!"

"Don't."

"You promised me to guard and protect my husband. But where were you when he was murdered? Where were the rest of you Reformers? And where will they be when Chain Drumm and his killers reelect their outlaw sheriff and continue robbing and murdering honest people? Hiding out in the hills somewhere. Reform League! Bah! You let them murder my man without turning a hand to help him, or even arrest them."

"I'm takin' Jeff's place on the ticket," Barr Brandon said grimly. "I'll run for sheriff. My name can be written in by the voters."

"Impossible, Barr," Ebenezer Dobbs objected. "You're in no condition for such a task. You have a fair chance of regaining the use of your legs if you use reasonable care. Otherwise, you may be a cripple for life."

The circuit rider lifted the grief-frenzied woman to her feet. "Don't blame Barr, Mrs. Kling, I beg of you," he counseled. "He should not even have appeared here

tonight. As you know, both his legs were broken when his horse fell on him three months ago. The accident brought on paralysis."

But Edith Kling was not to be consoled as she faced young Perry Brandon. "Well, *he* isn't a cripple!" she panted. "Why didn't he run for sheriff, instead of hiding behind my husband? Or do all the Brandons value their precious lives too much to risk death as Jeff did?"

Barr Brandon's shoulders were bowed in shame. "You're right, Edith," he said humbly. "I admit I was coward enough not to want to place my son in danger. It wasn't Perry's fault. He'd be only to glad to take the responsibility. But now the name of Brandon will go on the ticket. Perry will run for sheriff."

Mal saw Perry Brandon swallow hard, his clean-cut features suddenly sallow and drawn. He opened his mouth to say something then thought better of it, and remained silent. He shot a swift glance at Mal, and his eyes dropped.

Mal guessed the freezing fear and consternation that gripped Perry Brandon. There was pity in Mal's heart, for he alone, with the possible exception of the blue-eyed sister, knew that Barr Brandon's tall, stalwart son was a craven coward.

Barr Brandon had never known in the past that it was Mal who had always protected Perry in childhood, fighting his fist-fights for him while Perry skulked away, protecting him from the bullies and tormenters of their youth.

Mal had always hoped that Perry had the stuff in him that Barr Brandon expected of his son. But if so, it had never cropped to the surface. Perry had been weak of nature as a boy. As he grew older, he had been a secret gambler, drinker and wastrel. He had shifted his ranch responsibilities onto Mal's shoulders, shirked his duty to his mother and father, and had let Mal take the blame for his own weakness.

Now Perry was being ordered to step into the boots of a dead man, to share the same danger that Jeff Kling had faced, and from which he had died.

The issues were plain enough to Mal. The story was written here in Tamarack, with its evil fungus growth of hell-holes and gambling houses, and its unhealthy population of gunmen, parasites and outlaws.

Cliff Farrell, author of this novel, knows, as few people do, the thrilling story of the frontier. He unfolds another fascinating page of Western drama for you in the current *Dime Western*—"Red Trail to Hell's Outpost." Buy your copy of *Dime Western* today!

It was a story too often repeated on the cattle and mining frontiers. Chain Drumm had seized control not only of the town, but of the law offices. With his organization of thugs he was squeezing the lifeblood from the range.

CHAPTER THREE

Sheep in Wolfskin

EBENEZER DOBBS was shaking Perry Brandon's hand. "We'll back you to the limit, Perry," he boomed. "With God's help, we'll crush the forces of evil that beset us, free ourselves from the bonds of this slavery."

A few other men offered hasty congratulations to Perry.

"Keep your eyes peeled, Perry," a grizzled rancher warned. "Chain Drumm won't balk at another killing to re-elect Gig Cole. Don't sky-line yourself, and don't ride within gunshot of any blind coulees."

Perry's mouth was a taut line. He was breathing hard. Mal knew that panic was already working through him.

"Now," said the energetic circuit rider turning to the men, "There is much work to be done, friends. Every honest voter must be apprised before sundown tomorrow that Perry Brandon is the choice of our party. The murder of Jeff Kling may tend to deter the faint-hearted, and we must encourage them. Doubtless, Chain Drumm will marshal his evil legions, in an attempt to intimidate honest citizens and keep them away from the polls. We must guard against this.

"Drumm will control the outlaw vote, but if we do our part we are certain to defeat him three to one. Within forty-eight hours we shall have a new sheriff. I pray that it will be my privilege to be present when Perry Brandon, as his first official act, arrests Chain and Spot Drumm on murder charges."

Mal turned away, but the sky pilot overtook him. "Mal," he challenged, "be watchful, my son. Chain Drumm threatened your life. Do not treat it lightly. You're in danger each instant you remain in Tamarack."

"I'm leaving on the next train," Mal said tersely.

"I wouldn't blame you," Ebenezer Dobbs nodded. "It's the prudent course, even though it means that Spot Drumm may well escape the punishment he deserves."

Mal's eyes narrowed questioningly. "How do you mean, escape his punishment?" he began.

"You were the only eyewitness to the killing," the minister pointed out. "Your testimony will place the noose around the murderer's neck, regardless of attempts to discredit you. Without your story, our evidence is only circumstantial. I fear we would not gain a conviction. Law courts are sometimes hard to convince."

Mal thought it over for a moment. At last he shrugged and nodded. "I'll stay," he said.

Ebenezer Dobbs gripped his hand. "I knew that would be your decision, my son. It will more than atone for any wrongs you may have committed in the past. Barr Brandon's a kind-hearted man, a just man. He's grieved because you betrayed his trust, but in time you can justify yourself, and he will forgive. . . ."

The minister's glance turned significantly toward Alice, who stood with her father consoling Edith Kling. ". . . And there are others who are only too willing to forgive and forget, Mal. A bruised heart can be healed, but there is one necessary remedy."

Mal knew what he meant. He had tried

He dropped flat as slugs screamed over his head.

not to think about Alice Brandon during those three years, for he knew how deeply his unexplained disappearance must have hurt her. She and Mal had been deeply in love. He had hoped that time would have healed the injury he had inflicted on her, but the sky pilot's words showed that Alice had not forgotten.

Mal walked like a wooden man away from that place, instinctively heading for the railroad yards. Despite the promise he had made Ebenezer Dobbs to appear as a witness against Spot Drumm, he told himself he could not go through with it. He could not remain in the Tamarack, so near Alice Brandon, without being able to tell her the things that burned in his heart.

He stopped abruptly as Perry Brandon stepped into his path from the shadows of the unlighted freight shed.

"Mal," he said huskily, "you ought to know what a yellow dog I am! I wanted to tell dad the truth tonight—as I've tried to make myself tell him the real story a thousand times during the past three years. Bu I couldn't bring myself to it. I—I guess I'm just no good. A liar, a cheat, and a coward." He shook his head in an agony of self-recrimination.

Mal ran an arm across his shoulders, shook him chidingly with the comradeship they had known in the past. "Forget it, kid," he said gruffly. "It's all done, forgotten."

* * *

PERRY said wearily, "You're not fooling me any, Mal. I know what all this meant to Sis and to you. I saw your face as you looked at her, and I saw the hope and fear in her eyes as she looked at you. Both of you still care. If she knew that it was I who stole the money from dad's safe, and gambled it away in Chain Drumm's faro game, she'd be happy again.

"She's been miserable since the night you went away. She didn't know about the money until tonight, for dad had never mentioned it to anyone. He thought it was a secret between himself and you, and he couldn't believe it when he heard Chain Drumm mention it. Chain guessed where the money came from that he won from me. He guessed that you took the blame in order to spare dad, save mother from heartbreak and as a duty to the girl you loved. But I've got to tell the truth—"

"How's the Lady, kid?" Mal broke in gently.

Perry Brandon winced. The Lady was the affectionate name used at the ranch for his mother.

"She's—she's none too strong, Mal. Barr's accident was an awful blow to her. She nursed him night and day for weeks, and now she's paying the price. She's—"

He paused, suddenly realizing Mal's strategy in bringing his mother into the discussion. "Oh, Mal," he groaned, "you asked about the Lady just to—"

"You can't bring more trouble upon her now, kid," Mal pointed out swiftly. "Her life's wrapped up in you, you're her own flesh and blood. I look on her as I would my real mother, but after all there's a difference. If anything happened to you it would be real hell on her. The cards have all been played. Let them lay where they have fallen, kid. You can—"

Mal broke off as he heard a board creak in the darkness, and an instinctive warning streaked through his mind. He leaped against Perry, shouldering him aside.

A six-shooter blared from the corner of the shed fifty yards away, and Mal felt the hard hammer-blow as something hit his side with numbing force.

He dropped flat as two more slugs screamed overhead. A second gun had joined in the attack. In the powder flashes he glimpsed two crouching figures.

Mal's six-shooter was in his hand. He began shooting, sending four bullets to-

ward the flashes as fast as he could work the hammer.

One of the killers' guns went silent and Mal saw the shadowy figure reel and sag down. In the next instant the gusty breath of agony sounded from the second man. Mal fired another shot, it was followed by the thud of a falling body. Then the clashing echoes rolled away.

Perry Brandon had remained cowering in the shadows, making no attempt to draw the ivory-handled gun from his tooled-leather holster. Now he arose, breathing with strangled effort, trying to run in a blind panic.

But Mal caught his arm, "Steady kid," he counseled. "It's all over."

Pulling Perry along with him, he approached the two sprawled figures. They were members of Chain Drumm's gun crew, and one lay motionless in death. The other breathed his last as Mal bent over him.

Mal straightened. He could hear men racing to investigate this new burst of gunfire. He shoved his six-shooter, which reeked of fresh powder fumes, into Perry Brandon's unresisting fingers. Then he lifted Perry's gun from its holster, and shoved it in his own scabbard.

The two six-shooters were duplicates. Barr Brandon had given each of them one of the beautifully matched pair of blue-muzzled, ivory-handled .45's as a Christmas present five years in the past.

Mal braced himself against the grinding pain of his wound while excited, questioning townsmen came crowding to the scene. Barr Brandon, and his daughter, who had started to leave town in the buckboard, had turned back, and were among the first to arrive.

He fought back the effect of the bullet-shock. "You've picked yourselves a fightin' candidate for sheriff, men," he told the staring onlookers. "These two snakes laid an ambush for Perry Brandon. They took first shot, but he was too fast for 'em. He punched their tickets in a hurry. Lord help anybody that tries to get tough with him!"

Alice leaped down from the buckboard and threw her arms around her brother. "Perry! I knew you had it in you! I'm so proud, so glad."

Mal was swaying a little. He heard somebody say: "This fellow's been hit. Grab him!"

Alice turned and came with a rush toward him, horror and fear in her eyes. A black wave engulfed him then, and he sank into it.

His last blurred thought was one of complete satisfaction. He had seen the flaming pride that had leaped into old Barr Brandon's face as he gazed at his son, and the awe and sudden respect with which other men were regarding Perry.

Perry Brandon, in spite of himself, had been made to appear worthy of the responsibility he wanted to shun. Mal had given him a reputation as a game fighting man.

* * *

WHEN Mal drifted briefly out of the fog and saw that a doctor was working on him, Alice's troubled eyes were looking down at him. Then the mists closed in again.

Afterwards he realized he was lying on blankets in the bottom of a wagon which was moving along a starlit trail. Alice was sitting beside him. He made out Barr Brandon's brawny figure on the driver's seat. Perry Brandon and two or three more riders, whom he identified as Circle B cowboys, were following the rig up the trail.

He tried to struggle up, but the girl held him gently back. "Lie quiet, Mal," she urged. "You'll be feeling much better in the morning. You've got a broken rib, and an ugly gash in your side. But it was mostly bullet-shock that laid you out. The

doctor says it won't be serious with reasonable care. But it's best to take it easy. We're moving you out to the ranch."

"The ranch? I can't go there! I don't want to face the Lady."

"Mother doesn't know about the—the money," Alice whispered. "Dad never told her. She thinks it was a quarrel between you and me that caused you to go away. I never told her differently. She has worried so much about you, Mal. It will do her a world of good to see you again. For your own sake and mother's I'm taking you there. If you stay in town, Chain Drumm wouldn't hesitate to bushwhack you if he got the chance. In fact, I think they were trying to kill you instead of Perry."

She bent closer, speaking in a murmur that could not be heard by her father. "Strange that Perry used your gun in that fight tonight, Mal." Her face was near his. "You fooled everyone else," she added, "but I happen to know those two guns apart, even though they look alike to most people. Thanks for trying to make Perry something that he never has been. I'm afraid it won't succeed. You can't put a wolf skin on a sheep and make him act like a wolf."

Mal said nothing. There was nothing he could think worth saying.

An hour later Barr Brandon halted the wagon before the door of the rambling, homey Circle B ranch house, nestling in the timbered hills below Lost Wagon peak.

The shock of the bullet wound had now passed and Mal refused assistance as he walked into the house.

Mary Brandon, frail, small and dainty, with the gently reserved voice and manner of an aristocrat, greeted him as she would a long-lost son. She wept tears of joy, and hovering over him, sought to make him comfortable in the bed he had occupied for so many years. Her pride was clouded by fear as she listened to her husband tell the story of the shooting, Mal had related it. She kiss Perry's pale cheek and wept over him. Perry's eyes wandered to Mal, and there was shame and searing self-contempt in them.

Alice watched her mother bustle around. "See, Mal," she whispered. "It's the first time in weeks and months the Lady has acted like herself. You're better than a tonic for her!"

But Barr Brandon continued to ignore Mal. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Death's Substitute

IT WAS the eve of election day. Mal sat in a deep leather chair in the Circle B living room. The streaming glow of sundown warmed the west windows, laying purple shadows in the big room. Mal had passed a restless night, but the fever had subsided during the morning. He had shaved and dressed at noon in spite of the protests of Alice and her mother. The tightly bandaged injury in his side was still painful, but the weakness and nausea had passed.

"They're waiting for you in town."

Alone with Perry, who paced the floor in nervous, jerky strides, he heard the girl and her mother busy in the kitchen. Perry was haggard, harassed, his dark eyes bloodshot and freighted with growing desperation.

Barr Brandon had left early in the morning, along with his three veteran punchers, to make a final campaign through the range in behalf of the reform candidate. And now Perry Brandon's nerve was slowly breaking in spite of Mal's continual attempts to encourage him.

From outside came the rattle of wheels, and Ebenezer Dobbs' battered old top buggy and gray mare appeared, hitting a fast clip from town. The pudgy circuit rider bounced from the rig the instant the wheels stopped rolling, and charged excitedly into the living room.

"Perry," he boomed. "You're needed in town at once. Barr told me to summon you to Tamarack post haste."

Perry retreated a pace. "For what?" he demanded apprehensively.

"I regret to say the situation has taken a turn for the worse. Chain Drumm and his evil hirelings are stalking the streets, beating up honest men, threatening and terrorizing the town. Gig Cole is arresting members of the Reform party, throwing them in jail on trumped up charges."

"What can I do?" Perry protested, wiping the sweat beads from his forehead.

"Chain Drumm is intimidating the voters, to keep them away from the polls tomorrow. It's a shame that his methods are succeeding. Men are losing heart. Chain Drumm claims you are afraid to show yourself in town, and already citizens are abandoning faith. They will refuse to go to the polls tomorrow, our cause is lost—unless drastic action is taken immediately!"

The circuit rider drew from a pocket in his rusty black coat a packet of documents, and placed them in Perry's unwilling hands.

"Chain and Spot Drumm must be squelched now, tonight. An example must be made of them. We have one honest judge in this county who is not in their power. I appeared before Judge Kimball today and prevailed on him to issue these murder warrants. Spot Drumm murdered Jeff Kling last night. Chain Drumm is guilty of other killings for which he has never been brought to trial. They should be in jail this minute, instead of being free to terrorize honest citizens. You must arrest them, Perry. By doing so you will inspire the faint-hearted, and crush Drumm's organization."

"But—but I'm not the sheriff," Perry began.

Mal spoke up icily. "Any citizen can arrest a known criminal, Perry. You don't have to wear a badge to uphold the law."

"But—it's impossible! Chain and Spot Drumm won't submit to arrest. They'll—"

"Yeah," Mal nodded grimly. "They'll resist. You'll have to draw fast, shoot straight."

Mal looked at Ebenezer Dobbs. "You know what you're asking of Perry, I reckon?" he snapped.

The minister bowed his head. "I do, God help me!" he admitted sadly. "Perhaps it is a death sentence I'm pronouncing on you, Perry. As a mininster of the cloth, it is my duty to abhor bloodshed and violence. But as a soldier of God, I see clearly there is no other course open."

He paused, studying Perry's pale face. "You must not fail us, my son," he added slowly. "Your father is depending on you. The safety of hundreds of peaceful men and women rests on your decision. I know the risks I ask you to take. I will be the last to condemn you if you refuse. If you decide the danger is too great it will never be mentioned by me or by Mal Lacy, I am sure. No one else knows I came here to ask you to accept this mission."

Perry Brandon stood silent, looking

(Continued on page 134)

DO THE DEAD RETURN?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," tells of astonishing experiences in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. Here he lived among the lamas, mystic priests of the temple. "In your previous lifetime," a very old lama told him, "you lived here, a lama in this temple. You and I were boys together. I lived on, but you died in youth, and were reborn in England. I have been expecting your return."

The young Englishman was amazed as he looked around the temple where he was believed to have lived and died. It seemed uncannily familiar, he appeared to know every nook and corner of it, yet—at least in this lifetime—he had never been there before. And mysterious was the set of circumstances that had brought him. Could it be a case of reincarnation, that strange belief of the East that souls return to earth again and again, living many lifetimes?

Because of their belief that he had formerly been a lama in the temple, the lamas welcomed the young man with open arms and taught him rare mysteries and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which have enabled many to perform amazing feats. He says that the system often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, can be used to achieve brilliant business and professional success as well as great happiness. The young man himself later became a noted explorer and geographer, a successful publisher of maps and atlases of the Far East, used throughout the world.

"There is in all men a sleeping giant of mindpower," he says. "When awakened, it can make man capable of surprising feats, from the prolonging of youth to success in many other worthy endeavors." The system is said by many to promote improvement in health; others tell of increased bodily strength, courage and poise.

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(Continued from page 132)

fearfully at the warrants in his hand.

"He'll be there, Reverend," Mal spoke. "In an hour's time."

Ebenezer Dobbs realized that this was a command for him to leave. He hesitated, eyeing Mal sharply. Then he went out, climbed in his buggy, and headed through the early dusk back to Tamarack.

★ ★ ★

PERRY BRANDON laughed—the hard, cracked laughter of a man who had lost his pride in himself. He pulled a whiskey bottle from a drawer, uncorked it, and lifted it to his lips. But Mal took the bottle from his hand.

"You don't need that kind of brave-maker, Perry," he said. "Rig your horse. They're waiting for you—in Tamarack."

Perry ran a sleeve over his forehead. "Sure, Mal," he said hoarsely. "I can't back out now—can I?"

Perry Brandon was lying; Mal saw in his eyes that he didn't intend to go to Tamarack. As clearly as though he had admitted it, Mal knew that he meant to ride away and never return, taking his humiliation and shame with him.

For a bitter moment, seething scorn gorged Mal. He forced it back. He felt that this failure was his own fault, as well as Perry's, for certainly he had helped make a weakling of Perry, fighting his fights, assuming his responsibilities.

He had hoped against hope that Perry would learn to stand on his own feet, to gain confidence in himself. Mal had always believed that Perry's cowardice was more a matter of habit than of character, and that some day the spark would be ignited that would tear away the shell of weakness in which he had wrapped himself. But the bitter evidence that his hopes were vain was there, all too clearly, before his eyes. Perry was still soft as putty, unable to face responsibility.

Mal suddenly extended his hand. "Luck to you, Perry," he said. "I knew you'd come through for your dad. But if I were you I wouldn't wear those fancy duds or your ice-cream hat when you ride into Tamarack tonight. Nor the silver spurs and 'gator boots. A man dressed like that makes an easier target after sundown. Wear dark, plain clothes. . . ."

Perry would not meet his eyes. "Maybe you're right," he said in a faraway voice.

He left the room, moving like a man in his sleep. Mal heard him changing clothes in his room. And a few minutes later, Mal accompanied him to the corral. They shook hands after Perry had saddled up.

Mal's throat was tight after Perry had ridden from view. In spite of Perry's shortcomings, the two had always been like brothers. Perry had his weaknesses, but he also had his likeable qualities. But with instinctive certainty, Mal knew that Perry never expected to see again the ranch where he had been born. His whole attitude said, plainer than words, that he was going over the hill, riding down the trail a coward would follow.

Mal turned and found Alice standing in the shadows watching her brother. Suddenly she buried her face in her hands and fled into the house. Mal realized that she must have been listening when Ebenezer Dobbs was in the house, and she was not deluded by Perry's departure.

Presently, Mal tiptoed inside. The Lady, unaware of the disaster that hung over her family, was still busy in the kitchen. Muffled sobs sounded faintly beyond the closed door of Alice's room. Mal went on.

He entered Perry's room and gathered up the gaudy attire that had been discarded. Rolling the green silk shirt and foxed breeches under his arm, and carrying the big hat and silver-spurred boots, he helped himself to an extra six-shooter which hung on a wall peg.

(Continued on page 136)

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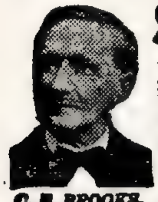

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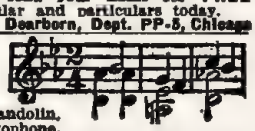

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(Continued from page 134)

Carrying this loot he left the house in silence. He selected a saddle from the jockey shed, and caught up a horse. . . .

Nearing the town he listened to the ribald uproar which swelled from the saloon line. Six-shooters were being fired in the air, the street was a mass of half-drunken, rioting men. Chain Drumm's outlaw organization had taken over the town on this election eve.

Mal pulled off the trail, tied up his horse and changed to Perry Brandon's flashy garb. The outfit, even to the boots, fitted him as though they had been tailored to his measure. He buckled on the two six-shooters, and pulled the big, cream-colored hat low over his forehead so that its wide brim shadowed his face.

He knew he would not pass the close inspection of anyone well acquainted with Perry. On the other hand, he believed their outward similarity would delude the average observer.

It was a long-shot gamble on behalf of law and order. The chances were that he might die in this attempt. If so, his disguise would be useless, and Perry Brandon would be branded publicly as a coward who had let another man act as his substitute in the face of danger. Mal knew that if he succeeded, Perry would get the credit.

But Perry Brandon's reputation was a minor issue now. The real stake was bigger than any individual. If Chain Drumm was smashed, the confidence and faith of the citizens in decent government would be restored. The reign of terror and thievery would end, and peace would return to the Tamarack. But if Chain Drumm survived, the range would sink deeper into the abyss of lawlessness.

Wearing Perry's flashy garb, Mal walked into Tamarack. He entered by dark sidestreets, working his way to the heart of the town.

Houses were dark and unlighted, with curtains tightly drawn. Mal sensed that citizens were barricaded behind barred doors, listening to the rioting, fearful of what violence the night might bring.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gunsmoke Salvation

MAL paused at a corner, looking out at the saturnalia in the wide, unpaved street. It was a playground of drunken, swaggering men. Windows had been smashed in some of the stores. A store was being invaded, and maudlin toughs were hurling tomatoes and vegetables at every target they could locate.

Ebenezer Dobbs was a prisoner of the mob. They had daubed red warpaint on his russet cheeks, hung empty whiskey bottles around his neck, and mounted him on a flea-bitten mule. A crowd of guffawing ruffians were parading him down the street.

Everywhere inflamed men were bawling a battle call: "Gig Cole for sheriff!"

Mal pulled his hat lower over his eyes and stepped into the street as Ebenezer Dobbs was escorted past by his tormenters. Angered at the plight of the helpless skypilot, Mal caught a drunken, loose-lipped gambler by the shoulder, swung his fist and knocked the man into the gutter. Then his six-shooter planted a bullet in the dust among the startled revelers.

"Get away from that preacher!" he snapped, "before I start to reform the lot of you—for keeps!"

He hit another ruffian with the muzzle of the gun as he spoke, and Ebenezer Dobbs lifted his booming, exultant shout. "Perry! Perry Brandon! Sons of Satan, behold the man who will drive you into the holes you crawled from!"

The crowd melted away as Mal ad-

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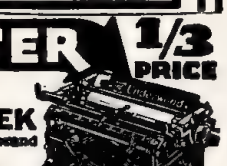

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vanced on them, releasing the preacher, who slid from the mule and scuttled to safety.

Mal walked on past, heading for the El Dorado. And the bedlam quieted as the news spread.

Mal avoided the glow of window lights and flaring torches. The crowd realized that he was heading for the El Dorado, and a drunken man lifted his thick voice in an uncertain jeer:

"He's goin' in there alone. Git a coffin ready, boys. Chain's in there. And Spot. They'll cool his coffee for him."

The crunch of fast-moving crutches sounded. Mel turned his head. The figure of Barr Brandon appeared from a building across the street, and came swinging toward him. The rancher had two sagging holsters slung on his thighs, and his craggy face glowed with the unbridled spirit of a fighting man.

"Son," he boomed proudly, "we will go in together. This is the happiest moment of my life. I—"

Suddenly, his voice faltered, broke off in dismay. He had recognized Mal!

"Perry couldn't make it, Barr," Mal said softly his words reaching only the cattleman's ears. "I'm acting in his place."

For an instant, staring, Barr Brandon stood frozen. He sagged a little in despair. Then with a surge he squared his mighty shoulders. And he cast aside his crutches. For the first time in many weeks he stood on his own legs without assistance.

He limped to Mal's side. "Lead the way, Mal," he said. "We will both go in." His voice was without heat or emotion. All the hopes and ambitions seemed to have been burned out of Barr Brandon.

Mal suddenly realized that Barr must have always suspected the truth about Perry, but had wilfully blinded himself to it. Now he could no longer ignore it, and he was accepting the inevitable with unyielding courage.

The El Dorado entrance was before them as they walked slowly, shoulder to shoulder toward it. Mal suddenly felt uplifted and at peace with the world. No matter what came of this, here was where he belonged—at Barr Brandon's side. There was understanding between them. It would not be hard to die now.

Then a tall figure in the plain garb of a cowboy stepped out from the shadows alongside the honkatonk, moved down the sidewalk and took his place at their side. Mal gasped as he recognized Perry Brandon!

His lean, handsome face was like marble, but there was a burning flame in his eyes. He carried himself like a soldier, his back ramrod-straight, his chin high. All the weakness seemed to have gone from his face.

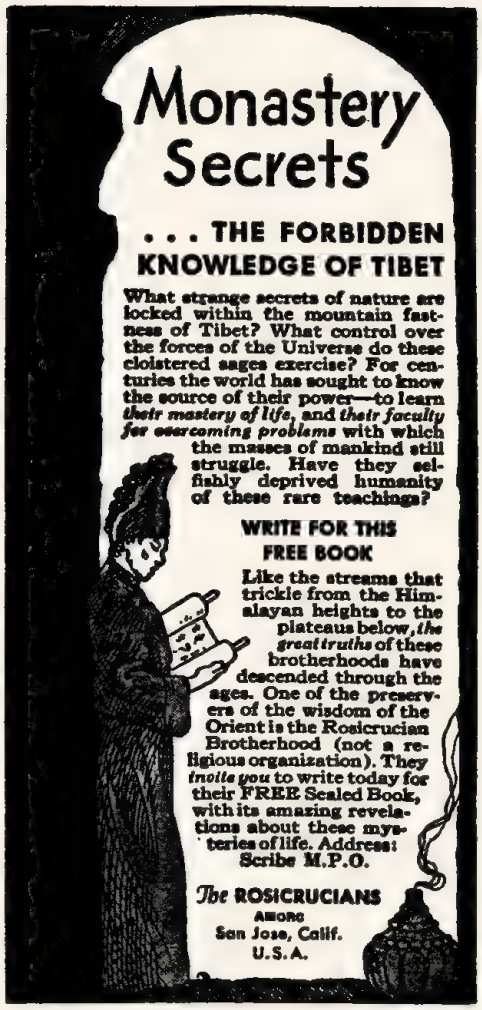
"After I skulked away from the ranch tonight, I realized why you had talked me into changing clothes, Mal," he said. "I waited along the trail, saw you ride past. I followed you and watched you make ready to take my place. Alice followed you too. She knows the truth also. It did something to me, seeing you walk into this town, dressed in my clothes. I've let you carry the load for me all my life, Mal. But never again. I've lived as a coward, but I won't die a coward. I'm going into the El Dorado—alone!"

Perry had a single six-shooter holstered at his side. He carried the murder warrants in his hand.

Barr Brandon's voice did not seem to lift or change, and yet there was a pride in it so vast it sent an eerie sensation through Mal's veins. It was like having the joy and humility and humble thanks in a man's soul displayed there before his eyes.

"I'm going with you, son," Barr said.

"And me, kid," Mal added. "The three of us—as we always stood together in the past."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Perry spoke again. "I stole that beef money, dad," he said quietly. "Gambled it away in Chain Drumm's place. Mal shouldered the blame, to spare you and mother and Alice the disgrace of having a thief in the family. There were other times when he protected me. I want you to know these things now, and I ask no forgiveness. I'm not fit to stand at the side of men like you and Mal Lacy."

Side by side then, they moved forward toward the swing door of the El Dorado. . . .

* * *

WORD of their coming must have preceded them. Mal saw the last of a departing rush of men crowd through the side door into the alley, staring wide-eyed over their shoulders.

The El Dorado, low-roofed, with painted wooden pillars sprouting from the sawdust-covered floor, with its poker tables and ornate bar and gambling layouts, looked vacant, tawdry and ominous.

As the three entered, they saw Chain Drumm at the far end of the bar, and his brother Spot was backed against the rear wall, along with Gig Cole, and two more slit-eyed men who were poised for the draw. Another pair of gunmen sat crouched and ready at a roulette table, and Mal knew they clutched drawn guns beneath the green baize top.

These seven were all who remained. Chain Drumm had found only a handful who were willing to fight to the death for him, now that showdown was at hand. His tinhorns and his bouncers and sycophants were letting him face the final issue.

Mal spoke from the entrance. "You're under arrest, Chain—charged with murder. And you, too, Spot. Lift your hands. We're taking you into custody now, jailing you later after Perry Brandon has duly been elected sheriff of this county."

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"Come an' git us if you want us," Chain Drumm said in a monotone.

Mal saw Spot Drumm's hand flick to his guns, and Mal's six-shooters leaped from the holsters, bellowing a double blast of death.

Spot Drumm's gun exploded, but two bullets had smashed through his chest, and his slug went into the ceiling.

Red death reigned that night in the El Dorado. Every man was shooting. A bullet tore the big hat from Mal's head. He fired twice at Gig Cole, and saw the way the man was pinned to the wall by one of his slugs.

Afterward, Mal remembered trading lead with a deadly little quarter-breed named Moccasin, and seeing Moccasin slip down into the sawdust.

He recalled watching Barr Brandon walk like a great grizzly bear down the room, shooting from both hands as he blasted the life out of Chain Drumm.

But above all he remembered the way Perry Brandon stood with a shining smile on his face, shooting into that hell of gunflame and swirling powdersmoke.

Gunfights are a matter of seconds. Like the flicker of lightning bolts they come and pass, leaving their stark, disconnected memories etched vividly on a man's mind.

These were the pictures Mal remembered. He saw Perry sway and sag as a bullet found him. He caught Perry's falling body, supported it with one arm, and he recalled the invincible gameness with which Perry lifted his gun and killed the man who had fired that shot.

Then it was over. Chain and Spot Drumm and Gig Cole were down—motionless in death. The other three lay groaning while red pools gathered beneath them in the sawdust.

Barr Brandon leaned heavily against the roulette table. Blood dripped from his fingers, and his left arm hung limp and bullet-broken.

Mal felt the throbbing sting of a deep crease on his shoulder. And ricochet had torn through the thigh of his right leg. He laid Perry Brandon's unconscious body on a table, tore away his shirt. After a moment he looked up at Barr.

"Creased," he said, and there was awe in his voice. "Only a rib crease. That's all it is—Barr. He'll live!"

Ebenezer Dobbs appeared in the door, staring through the coiling gunsmoke. Other citizens who had emerged from their homes, crowded the entrance.

Alice came fighting her way through them. She looked at her father and her wounded brother. But it was Mal upon whom she descended, wildly demanding to know if he had been hurt.

Barr Brandon ignored his wounded arm. He stood straight on his legs. Barr Brandon did not yet realize it, but he would have no need for crutches again. The stress of the gunfight had worked a cure in the nerves that no doctor had been able to bring about.

Barr ran an arm around Mal's shoulders. "Mal Lacey," he said, "never stole a dime from any man in his life. It was my son who took the money. Mal assumed the blame. Perry told me the story tonight. He came here to die like a man and square up for his mistakes in the past. I'm proud of him, proud to be his father."

Ebenezer Dobbs lifted a booming voice. "Praise be to God!" he shouted. "The forces of evil have been destroyed. The chains are struck from our limbs. Tomorrow a new day shall dawn in Tamarack range, with Perry Brandon as our sheriff."

Mal hardly heard the wild cheer that arose and swept the town. For Alice was in his arms, clinging to him. . . .

And Mal Lacy knew that he'd come home to stay. . . .

THE END

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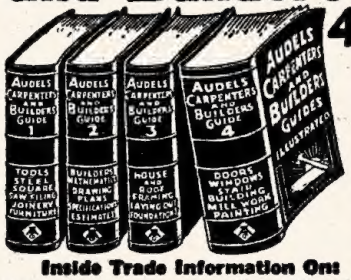
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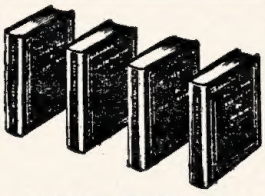

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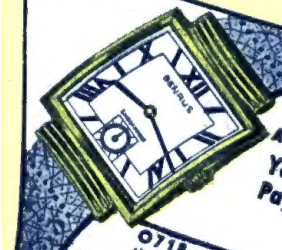

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